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Developing an Ethical Framework in Decision Making of Rural Elementary School Principals in Pennsylvania

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe individual Pennsylvania rural elementary principals’ experiences of ethical decision-making in a complex era. Ethical dilemma, in this case, is the term used to depict an incident which calls for a decision to be made when moral values or ethical principles were in conflict. Also, to learn how these principals encounter a given dilemma, how they resolve this dilemma and if they use the multiethical paradigms as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). For the phenomenological inquiry portion Clark Moustakas’ (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology and Robert Nash’s (2002) three moral languages provide the basis for this research study.

Twelve semi-structured interviews are conducted alongside the administration of a demographics questionnaire to explore the respondents’ perceptions on leading in the rural context. The principals are presented with four vignettes and the same four questions at the end of each. The twelve principals that are interviewed used multiple paradigms when solving difficult ethical decisions and their experience influence the paradigms they use most frequently. The respondents all use the ethics of justice and the profession more than the ethic of care and critique. The participants lived experiences are linked to the vignettes and the paradigms they use most frequently. Their age and rural setting is found to affect their decision making processes. Gender has no effect on ethical decision making.
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Dedication

To those two people my life holds all meaning:
Zakieh Hozien and Ismail Hozien, my mother and father

And to my children
Hana, Ismail, Isra and Mahmoud Hamdi

But especially that lovely smile that awoke to daily and looked into her eyes and understood the meaning of steadfast patience and endurance, Isra Hamdi

I dedicate this dissertation to you all
CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The principal is the highest ranking administrator of the school. The position is one of power, prestige, trust, and, above all, responsibility, lending itself to both public scrutiny and self-examination. The principal makes many decisions on a daily basis. Foster (1986) asserts that at the heart of every one of these decisions is the resolution of a moral dilemma because every decision carries with it the potential to restructure human life.

School administrators make numerous decisions every day, ranging from those simple and routine made almost mechanistically, to complex decisions, made with much deliberation. These decisions are governed by standards that go beyond the set of circumstances under consideration. The very act of decision making is a choice governed by some rule or framework which is separate from the alternatives.

Often, the daily activities of the school principal involve navigating moral dilemmas within politically charged contexts. Examination of activities and iterations in schools and classes suggest that every administrative decision, from policies and procedural operations to grades and discipline, could and often do, have moral significance. This research will began with an overall question; how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions related to their work? This study sought to explore the standards, ethical frameworks and processes utilized by elementary school principals in making ethical decisions.
Theoretical Perspective

The investigation of the phenomenon, of how elementary school principals make ethical decisions in their work, evolved from one theoretical framework, specifically the Multiple Ethical Paradigm Approach (MEP) (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011).

The theoretical framework from Shapiro and Stefkovich, using four ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care and the profession created the foundation for this study. The bedrock of Shapiro and Stefkovich’s work was that it emerged from a case study approach relating to ethical dilemmas. In their work the authors reference other educational frameworks based on reflective practices that provide real life cases to illustrate the ethical paradigms. The process of using the multiple ethical paradigms allow the person to reflect regarding ethical principles before making a decision. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explain that these ethical paradigms, through discussion and analysis of real-life moral dilemmas, provided tools for educational leaders in our complex educational enterprises. They state that practitioners need to:

- Open their minds by taking into account a variety of models, not simply one or two. Dilemmas in educational institutions can be complicated and may naturally lead to the use of two or more paradigms to solve problems. Today, with the complexity of situations and cultures, it is more important than ever for educational leaders to think more broadly and go beyond ‘self’ in an attempt to understand others (p.7).

It is clear that school principals are primary agents of the educational system. Within the school community, principals are dealing with enormous value-laden issues and their ethical principles, which often can vary in degrees depending on the complexity of situations.

This research study explored ethics and ethical reasoning from an analysis of elementary school principals’ approaches to real-life ethical dilemmas. In addition, utilizing MEP, the intent
was to provide rich descriptive data from the narrative inquires as they relate to problem solving in ethical dilemmas. A more in-depth view of the theoretical framework was discussed in the literature review. The analysis of the MEP pertaining to the data collection and analysis was an ongoing process in this study.

**Significance of the Study**

The relationship between ethical decision making, demographics, and leadership styles among Pennsylvania elementary school principals was worthy of study. The principal is the recognized leader of the school and the work of the school district is essentially a moral activity.

The ethical behavior of the leader of the organization has considerable impact on the ethical behavior on others in the organization. The leader is responsible for the norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization. Leaders set the moral tone (Bennis & Nanus, 1997). Hitt (1990) concurs that ethics and leadership go hand-in-hand. An ethical environment is conducive to effective leadership, and effective leadership is conducive to an ethical environment. Ethics and leadership function as both cause and effect.

On the other hand, Sergiovanni (1992) asserted that administrators have conflicting roles. He concluded that the challenge of leadership is to make peace with two competitive imperatives, the managerial and the moral. School principals confront ethical issues which are highly complex. Hosmer (1987) identified five conclusions concerning the complexity of managerial ethics: extended consequences, multiple alternatives, mixed outcomes, uncertain ramifications, and personal implications.

The work of educational leaders should be work that is at the same time intellectual and moral; an activity that is characterized by a blend of human, professional, and civic concerns. The moral challenges that confront schools are enormous and clearly there is a call for more
moral leadership of schools as educational leaders are now being challenged as never before (Starratt, 2004).

School administrators, as they work in the community, parents, teachers and students, bring with them their own beliefs and values. The strength of these beliefs and values shape their actions and influence those affected by administrative decisions and the education process in general. The operating principles of the moral life are the value commitments of people embraced through their own autonomous convictions and through institutions such as family, church, and society. This general truth extends to school administrators as they bring their humanity into the practice of their vocation.

Principals make numerous large and small decisions every day. Further, principals are responsible for and must justify the decisions they make. Scholars have explored the basis and standards of ethical considerations (Cooper, 1990; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011; Rawls, 1958). However, less attention has been given to the description and explanation of the phenomenon of morality. Little attempt has been made to work out a theory of human nature that governs ethical behavior. Most of the focus has been on administrative practice with less focus on leaders’ internal processes, attitudes, values, and beliefs.

The investigator believed that this study made an important contribution to those concerned with effective and ethical leadership in schools because it explored the values, principles and application of school principals as well as the moral reasoning methods in which they engaged as they made decisions. Moreover, the study provided additional evidence for those who state that ethical training is an essential component for those who will assume administrative leadership positions in our nation’s schools.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics of Pennsylvania public elementary school principals’ ethical decision making and examined the relationships that existed, if any, between ethical decision making and personal demographics. The primary purpose was to understand as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) which ethical framework, namely that of justice, critique, care and/or the profession, if any, are implemented by rural elementary school principals in Pennsylvania when making decisions.

To gather data for this qualitative study, public school elementary principals in central Pennsylvania were interviewed. The interview process was semi-structured. Principals completed a demographics questionnaire (Appendix A). The interview consisted of each principal reading four ethical dilemmas, and answering the same four questions for each dilemma (Appendix B). Responses to the four questions were audio recorded and transcribed onto a secured laptop. The information collected was the principals’ choice and reasons as to why they made the decisions that they did.

The findings from this study provided a link between theory and practice which can be used to understand ethical decision making processes of selected elementary school principals in rural Pennsylvania schools.

Research Questions

This study focused specifically on the process of ethical decision making by school principals. The researcher identified and described the principles and the progression which influenced the ethical decision making of twelve elementary school principals in rural Pennsylvania. This research began with an overarching question; how do elementary school
principals make ethical decisions in their work? In addition, this study addressed the following related questions:

1. Do ethical factors emerge when administrators provide answers to vignettes of real life dilemmas in schools?
2. Were the decisions principals made regarding the ethical dilemma vignettes governed by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, how?
3. Which ethical framework, justice, critique, care or the profession, if any, do these principals use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas in the vignettes?
4. Do rural elementary school principals perceive the rural context as affecting their ability to make difficult ethical decisions? If so, how?

Assumptions

It was assumed that the semi-structured interview was the appropriate investigative tool and that the information collected was meaningful. Further, it was assumed that the investigator will be resourceful, systematic and honest in her effort to control bias.

The study was focused, yet flexible in design. The participants’ perspectives on ethical decision making were reported and were assumed to be accurate. The investigator worked to assure confidentiality and to promote open, honest responses.

Limitations of the Study

Every study has a set of limitations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), or “potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher” (Creswell, 2009, p. 198). A limitation is an uncontrollable threat to the internal validity of a study. Internal validity refers to the likelihood that the results of the study actually mean what the researcher indicates they mean. Explicitly
stating the research limitations is vital in order to allow other researchers to replicate the study or expand on a study (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, by explicitly stating the limitations of the research, the researcher can help other researchers “judge to what extent the findings can or cannot be generalized to other people and situations” (Creswell, 2009, p. 198).

A qualitative study approach was used. There were limitations to this study. The study was especially dependent upon the honesty of those who provide the data. Although the investigator will guarantee confidentiality and will encourage open, honest dialogue, the principals might be tempted to give the answers they will think the investigator expects rather than those formulated by their own true thoughts and feelings.

This study is limited by the instrument and its predictive ability. The vignettes might not be as nuanced as they should be. This research was further limited to a description of the actual participants and could not be generalized in any quantitative sense to the larger population. Generalizations emanating from the data that was provided gave the opportunity to formulate theory related to ethical decision-making.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to “what the researcher is not going to do” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In this research study, the goals of the research will outline what the researcher intends to do; without delimitations, the reader will have difficulty in understanding the boundaries of the research. In order to constrain the scope of the study and make it more manageable, researchers should outline in the delimitations – the factors, constructs, and/or variables – that were intentionally left out of the study. Delimitations impact the external validity or generalizability of the results of the study (Creswell, 2009, Wiersma, 2001, Maxwell, 2005).
This study was delimited to the awareness, outlook, position, and interactions of twelve elementary school principals in Pennsylvania. The subjects were selected based on gender and the context in which they work. Six males and six females were selected from those willing to participate. All subjects in this study were volunteers who could opt to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, the principals must have had one year of experience in the rural setting and in a district that experienced some level of geographic isolation and low population density.

Delimitations of the study include:

1. The study was confined to selected rural elementary school principals and only in the state of Pennsylvania. The uniqueness of the study within a specific context made it difficult to replicate exactly in another context (Creswell, 2009).

2. Principals’ responses were reflections of, and confined to their familiarity and know how in the state of Pennsylvania.

This study was delimited to the in depth analysis of an interview of four hypothetical scenarios and open response questions to examine public elementary school principals’ ethical decision-making processes. The study was further delimited by the criteria used for selection including the years of experience, age, gender, school enrollment and current employment as a public elementary school principal in the state of Pennsylvania. There were no retired elementary school principals or any other administrators included in this study, as the focus was on current Pennsylvania elementary school principals’ decision-making.

**Definition of the Terms**

To facilitate understanding and ensure clarity, the following terms were defined:
1. Ethics: Branch of philosophy which is concerned with morality and its problems and judgments; a systematic, rational reflection or judgment people make regarding what is right or wrong, good or bad, in the relations within or between individual or collective centers of intelligence and will (Stob, 1978)

2. Ethical Behavior: behavior which conforms to an ethical standard or code.

3. Ethical Code: “system of standards to which we conform, internalize, and take for our own. . .nonbureaucratic structure that guides professional conduct and decisions” (Goens, 1996, 13)

4. Decision-Making: process of finding and attending to problems, alternatives, or solutions to cope with the identified problem, evaluating the solutions and choosing among them, and implementing the chosen solution (Walker, 1993).

5. Ethical Decision Making: application of ethical principles to a particular case as part of the decision making process (Strike, Haller, and Soltis, 2005)

6. Morals: principles derived from various systems of belief regarding right and wrong conduct (Starratt, 1991)

7. Value: principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desirable.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

This study sheds some light on twelve rural principals’ perceptions on leading in the rural context and how their resolutions to dilemmas and decision making impacts leadership. The main topic is to understand how elementary school principals make ethical decisions in their work. Therefore, this review of the literature will discuss the following: 1) the rural education context; 2) the role of the principal in moral decision-making; 3) moral decision-making; 4) ethical frameworks; and 5) case studies.

In today’s dynamic schools, administrators, learning communities, teachers, and families are facing everyday changes in education that are centered on often multifaceted and confusing value systems which is only further complicated by the myriad of technological advancements to which students and educators have access. As a result, there is a rebirth of interest in character education, moral education, and ethics based on the belief that children should be given assistance in learning to make moral decisions grounded in values of responsibility and respect. Today, it is also believed with a greater sense of urgency, due to eroding family principles, which educators and administrators need to address these values through an ethical school environment and curriculum.

Due to the fact that few research studies on rural school principals exist, this review of the literature considers research relating to educational leadership as a whole. Because context is such an important element to both research and leadership, the lack of leadership research with a rural focus, in turn, strengthens the significance of this study. Since there is a lack of empirical data coming from research relating to rural education, many sections of this literature review use opinion papers from experts in the field of rural education. Whenever empirical data exists, it is
incorporated in the review of the literature. Of course, similarities do exist between rural, suburban, and urban educational leadership. These similarities help to shape the interview questions and other data collection instruments used in this study. Administrators in all settings face similar problems. The context of the school and community may suggest the use of a different paradigm in analyzing difficult decisions. It is these difficult decisions that helped to shape this study’s view of rural educational leaders.

The Rural Education Context

The rural context as described in this chapter refers to the circumstances in which rural schools exist. The history of rural areas, their demographics, and economics set them apart when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. The schools that exist therein also experience funding inequities. Furthermore, student outmigration and consolidation of community schools create challenges to administrators in the rural context. The culture of the rural community itself is crucial to understanding rural educational leadership. A dominant view exists in the research that rural people and rural communities are an impediment to the ideals of progressive education. All of these elements make educational leadership in the rural context a phenomenon that differs from urban and suburban settings.

In exploring the research on rural schools and the rural context, it is helpful to begin with an historical overview. As Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) explain, educational history is the key to understanding the day-to-day activities of educators. Rural education finds its beginning in the foundations of the United States and in the early debates between Federalism and Republicanism. The Federalists promoted a government machine that would pump out solutions without requiring citizen engagement.
Thomas Jefferson argued that Republicanism was a better approach as a hands-on, face-to-face way of solving problems (Nachtigal, 1994). Nachtigal concludes that the federalist approach prevailed in the development of the Constitution and other laws impacting state and federal relationships.

During the 19th Century, rural communities experienced growth and small towns developed throughout the countryside. Rural communities provided farming, forestry, and mining that fueled much of the nation (Harmon, 2001). Virtually every school was rural prior to the Industrial Revolution (DeYoung, 1994). One-room school houses were spread throughout the landscape. Teachers were often unemployed surveyors or disabled veterans (DeYoung, 1994). Rural schools originally had volunteer administrators and partially trained teachers (DeYoung, 2002). Early rural schools were characterized by a lack of control, lack of funding, and even a lack of teachers.

The argument over the purpose of schooling continued throughout the first half of the 20th Century and often found students with college aspirations at odds with students focused on occupational learning. Even today, rural students have a lower college attendance rate compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Yan, 2002). After World War II, the comprehensive high school model with tracking systems was firmly in place throughout American education. Schools in rural settings presented a problem for educators because they did not have the resources to provide comprehensive programs (DeYoung, 2002). Many community schools in rural communities were closed as consolidation measures were implemented to provide a more efficient means of allowing for a comprehensive model (Howley, 1996).

Creating a more efficient rural education model means allowing minorities to be probably educated as well. Rural Hispanics have the lowest level of education of all racial groups (USDA,
Non-rural African Americans are twice as likely as rural African Americans to have a college degree. College completion is highly related to the urbanization level of a given area (USDA, 2003). Low education levels are highly correlated to persistent poverty. As the skill requirements of jobs continue to rise, better-educated adults move to urban and suburban areas. Most of the low skilled jobs have been lost to foreign competition and outsourcing. Manufacturing jobs still account for one quarter of all rural earnings (USDA, 2003). Outmigration remains a problem for rural communities as the best and brightest students continue to leave for better opportunities in urban and suburban areas (Wright & Lesisko, 2010).

Not all of the data are negative. Academically, rural students perform as well as urban students. Fifteen percent of rural adults have graduated from college, and that is more than four times the number holding degrees in 1970 (USDA, 2003). Younger rural adults (under 55) have a higher level of education than older adults. Rural college graduates make more than twice the earnings of rural high school dropouts. Rural college graduates experience a very low rate of poverty (USDA, 2003). Even with these improvements cited by the United States Department of Agriculture, rural education still lags behind urban levels.

Studies show significant differences in post-secondary persistence between rural, urban and suburban students (Yan, 2002). A study of 642 Pennsylvania students found rural students less likely to attend college. In Pennsylvania, 48 percent of rural students did not attend college, compared to 28 percent urban and 36 percent suburban (Yan, 2002). The rural and urban students who do not attend college were evenly distributed between the low and middle socio-economic category. Moreover, rural males are less likely to attend college as compared to rural females (Yan, 2002). This study found parental influence to be a significant factor for rural
students attending and completing college. Rural students are about twice as likely as urban and suburban students to have parents who did not expect them to go to college (Yan, 2002).

Poverty has been a historic characteristic of life for rural areas (Huang & Howley, 1991). Most of the chronically poor counties in the United States are located in rural areas. In 1986, rural poverty was 50 percent higher than poverty in urban areas. Rural poverty rates rose faster and decreased slower than urban rates throughout the 1980s. Unemployed rural workers were unemployed 50 percent longer than their urban counterparts. To gain a full perspective of poverty in rural communities, the focus must include employment status, family structure, and race of rural people (Huang & Howley, 1991).

Rural poverty can be best described as working but poor. Three-quarters of heads of households work year round (Huang & Howley, 1991). Two-thirds of impoverished rural families live in households with a family member who is working (Huang & Howley, 1991). A family with working parents is about twice as likely to be poor in rural areas as opposed to suburban and urban areas (Huang & Howley, 1991). The assumption that poverty is primarily an urban problem is simply wrong.

Poverty’s effect on students can be far reaching. In their research, Christofides, Pats, & Behr (2006) found that urban and rural students from disadvantaged backgrounds complete an average of eight fewer years of schooling compared to their advantaged counterparts. Furthermore, educational goals have an impact on educational attainment. Howley & Johnson, (2012) found that rural students have lower goals than urban youth. They are less likely to have educated parents with professional careers. In addition, rural parents are more likely to approve of their children not attending college (Christofides, Pats, & Behr, 2006). Advice from school counselors seems to follow that standard. When interviewing rural students in Pennsylvania, this
researcher found that the schools guide students towards jobs like plumbing, carpentry, and mechanics because “they pay more than a college degree,” (K. Shirk, Personal Interview, February 2, 2012; P. Wright, Personal Interview, February 5, 2012). The only inspiration for one student to attend and graduate from college was his superior athletic abilities.

Poverty in the rural context is not seen by the media or policy-makers, and it is less noted in educational research. Blaum (2000) finds that the socioeconomic level of parents greatly influenced their children’s educational achievement in terms of the years of formal schooling that they complete. Advantaged rural boys are likely to complete 18.4 years of schooling and girls 19.1 years (Blaum, 2000). Boys from average backgrounds are likely to complete 13.1 years and girls 14.2 years (Blaum, 2000). Rural boys from disadvantaged backgrounds average 9.4 years of schooling and girls average 10.9 years (Blaum, 2000). Blaum’s findings indicate how significant poverty can be a negative influence on educational achievement in rural areas.

The cultural diversity of rural communities in the United States is increasing, but it can best be described as geographic diversity (Harmon, 2001). In other words, many rural communities are clustered with a certain race or ethnic group in a specific location (DeYoung, 1994). Rural minority groups often live in geographic clusters where poverty tends to be high (Harmon, 2001). For example, rural counties in which one-third of the population is African American are only found in the South. Rural minorities are significantly more impoverished as a percentage of the population than their suburban and urban counterparts (Harmon, 2001). There has always been a misconception that poverty is a minority problem in the United States; however, that is not the case in rural areas. Seventy-three percent of the poor people living in rural areas are White (Harmon, 2001).
In Pennsylvania there is a growing income gap between rural and urban areas (Christofides, Pats, & Behr, 2006). A study of the income of Pennsylvania residents, conducted by East Stroudsburg University, found that the income gap between rural and urban areas has grown from 19 percent in 1969 to 25 percent in 2001. In 2001, the per-capita income gap between urban and rural residents was $8,637 (Christofides et al., 2006).

A study conducted by Kurre (2000) finds that “there is a very real cost of living (COL) difference between urban and rural areas in Pennsylvania” (p. 59). However, not all rural areas have a lower cost of living. For example, Pike and Monroe counties tended to have higher living expenses despite their rural classification (Kurre, 2000). Kurre (2000) found that the cost of living patterns in Pennsylvania include the following: 1) urban areas tend to be more expensive than rural areas; 2) eastern tier counties tend to be more expensive than others; 3) the southeastern counties, especially Philadelphia and its suburbs, tend to be especially high cost; and 4) counties on the western tier of the state and those around Pittsburgh tend to exhibit higher costs than northern tier counties (Kurre, 2000). The average difference between urban and rural COL indexes was 2.4 percent. According to Kurre (2000), when you account for population density, the COL index is six percent.

Lochry (1998) studied superintendents and principals in small rural elementary school districts in California to explore the demands on administrators. This study indicated that they were often not prepared for the responsibilities of the job. These districts have had high administrative turnover rates. The participants in this study perceived themselves as being very involved with the duties and responsibilities of the position. In the districts studied, the superintendents acted as elementary school principals. This was primarily a result of the size of
the district. The results of this study suggest that preparation programs need to better prepare
potential administrators for the demands of these positions in small rural districts.

Knapp (1998) studied leadership in poor rural districts from the perspective of
educational leaders who introduced initiatives and programs that focused on students, staff, and
school climate. Specifically, this study explored the following questions: 1) What initiatives have
the principals taken to offset disadvantages of small size, rural isolation, and lower than average
wealth? 2) Which of these initiatives have been successful? 3) What are the indicators of
success? and 4) What were the barriers to successful implementation and how were they
overcome? (Knapp, 1998) Seventy-eight small, poor, rural districts in New York State were
studied. The most commonly listed successful initiatives were school-college partnerships, block
scheduling, inclusion, distance learning, common planning time, and professional development.
Indicators of success were higher Regents State Exam scores and higher inclusion rates. The
greatest barriers listed were teacher resistance and financial limitations (Knapp, 1998).

According to Kurre (2000), when you account for population density, the COL index is
six percent higher for urban areas. Urban areas were found to be more expensive in all sub-index
areas including: groceries, housing, utilities, transportation, healthcare and miscellaneous (Kurre,
2000). In 2010, 3.5 million people, or about 27 percent of the state’s 12.7 million residents,
lived in Pennsylvania’s 48 rural counties (CRPA, 2010).

Changing economic trends are largely to blame for the problem of rural poverty. Rural
areas have not experienced steady growth due to cycles of boom and bust” (p. 4). They often
have a dependence on natural resources. Rural communities, according to Alan DeYoung (1994),
can be categorized into eight primary types of activities: farming, mining, manufacturing,
retirement, government services, federal lands, persistent poverty, and unclassified. Citing the U.S. Census Bureau, the Center for Rural PA states, “among rural households, 40 percent had incomes below $35,000” (CRPA, 2010).

On average, Pennsylvania rural residents are older than urban residents. In 2010, the Census Bureau reported that 17 percent of the rural population was 65 years old and older compared to 15 percent of the urban population. From 2000 to 2010, the number of rural seniors increased by 5 percent, while the number of urban seniors increased by 1 percent (CRPA, 2010).

Rural Pennsylvania is becoming increasingly dependent on unearned income. In 2009, about 41 percent of total personal income came from unearned sources, such as interest, dividends and from government transfer payments, like Social Security and unemployment compensation (CRPA, 2010). In 2006-2010, 19 percent of rural Pennsylvanians who were 25 years old and older had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Thirteen percent of rural residents did not have a high school diploma (CRPA, 2010). According to the 2010 U.S. Census 94% of rural Pennsylvania is white and only 6% is non-White.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2010, 48 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties had a population density below the statewide average. In addition, these 48 counties contained 75 percent of the state’s land area and 27 percent of the state’s population. These three ratios have changed little since 1990. This means rural counties and their residents are a big part of Pennsylvania (CRPA, 2010). Rural Pennsylvania is different from the rest of rural America. Rural Pennsylvania is slower growing, and its population is older and less racially and ethnically diverse than the rest of rural America (CRPA, 2010).
With society making a shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, some rural communities are experiencing economic growth because of reduced isolation from new communication technologies. A long-standing belief that rural economies rely on farming is a misnomer (Sherwood, 2005). Agriculture is no longer the dominant staple of rural economies that it once was (Huang & Howley, 1991).

Even with the increased promise of the Information Age, rural areas experience a lack of demand for a highly-educated workforce. When economic growth occurs in rural areas, it most often brings more minimum-wage jobs. The service industries are expected to see the most growth in the future; however, rural workers in service fields presently experience the highest poverty rates (Huang & Howley, 1991).

Pennsylvania experienced economic growth throughout the 1990s; nonetheless, disparities still exist between rural and urban areas (Shields, 2004). In Pennsylvania, growth has been seen in the service and technology-based sectors. The southeast counties have experienced the most growth while northern tier and western counties have grown slowly. Growth rates are higher in rural counties than urban ones and the per-capita income gap has continued to grow (Shields, 2004).

Employment in rural Pennsylvania grew by 98,763 jobs between 1990 and 2000, 12 percent faster than the nine percent growth of urban areas (Shields, 2004). The industries in rural Pennsylvania providing the most growth were service, retail industries and health services. A shift from manufacturing to service industries has occurred (Shields, 2004). In rural Pennsylvania, all but two industries experienced the most growth. Both of these were export industries, meaning that the industries sell most of the goods and services outside of the state (Shields, 2004). Rural Pennsylvania has seen growth in high technology manufacturing with a
ten percent increase in jobs in the 1990s. Producer services grew half as much in rural Pennsylvania compared to the national rate through the 1990s (Shields, 2004). In the 1990s, rural Pennsylvania added more jobs than urban Pennsylvania, but the earnings were significantly lower. Throughout the 1990s rural earnings grew 36 percent compared to urban earnings that grew by 48 percent (Shields, 2004). The growth in rural employment has been relatively low-wage jobs (Shields, 2004). Factors most influencing rural growth included the following: college education and highway infrastructure (Wright & Lesisko, 2010).

Many circumstances exist in rural communities throughout the country (Sherwood, 2005). Rural areas are defined in the following ways: poor rural, wealthy rural, rural with minorities, rural with no minorities, rural communities with high ESL (English as a Second Language) populations, and large rural and small rural communities (Sherwood, 2005). Variables exist in regard to isolation and population scarcity as well as outmigration trends. The specific needs of rural areas are often masked by researchers who lump all rural communities together. Furthermore, policy makers have not come to consensus on a definitive definition of rural (Sherwood, 2005). Alan DeYoung (1994) outlined five different typologies of rural communities as developed by Tom Gjetlan in 1982. Gjetlan went further to suggest that within these five typologies individual school cultures differ significantly (DeYoung, 1994).

The five general typologies that Gjetlan developed are as follows: 1) High Growth Rural Communities – in the midst of economic expansion and/or very near expanding metropolitan areas; 2) Reborn Rural Communities – inundated by city refugees attempting to escape urban congestion; 3) Stable Rural Communities – which include stereotypical rural areas often still involved with agriculture, although their numbers continue to dwindle; 4) Depressed Rural Communities – where the local economy is underdeveloped and outmigation is high; and 5)
Isolated Rural Communities – those typically far removed from the transportation and commerce centers of the nation (DeYoung, 1994). Many times, isolated and depressed rural communities provide the most difficult concerns for educational leaders because of their many disadvantaged children combined with a lack of resources (DeYoung, 1994).

A study conducted by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2000) explored attitudes of rural residents regarding the government and the economy. Survey respondents believed the government was spending too little in the areas of job creation, aging issues, child care, education, health services, and farming and agriculture. Respondents felt the government was spending adequately related to parks and recreation, historic preservation, and public transportation. Respondents showed a moderate to high level of trust in government institutions. Police, local legislators, educational institutions and government agencies all received high ratings. Congress had the lowest ratings. The four most important policy areas, respondents noted, were education, public safety, economic development, and health services. The rural residents favored regional competition with local control. Rural people felt the government should take action to control “suburban sprawl” as long as it was handled locally. Fifteen percent of respondents felt unemployment was the most crucial problem facing them. In regard to policy, health services, jobs, economic opportunities, and education were the most important to rural Pennsylvanians (CRPA, 2000).

The Role of the Principal in Moral Decision-Making

The term “dilemmas” can be defined in several ways, but there is a common theme among the many varying descriptions of this concept. The Oxford American Dictionary (McKean, 2006) defines dilemma as “a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives” (p.251). According to Marcus (1996), “dilemmas are
presented as a predicament for an individual” (p.24). McConnell (1996) defines a moral dilemma as “a situation in which each of two things ought to be done but both cannot be done. Restricted to single agents, a dilemma is a situation in which a person ought to do A, ought to do B, and cannot do both A and B” (p.36). MacLagan (2003) believes that dilemmas occur when an individual is faced with a difficult situation, involving two or more values in conflict with one another. “Put differently, this means that in a dilemma, one faces – with a greater or lesser degree of intensity – conflicting moral duties” (p.22). Denig and Quinn (2001) consider ethical/moral dilemmas quite commonplace in today’s world and believe this is partially due to the need for hurried decision making, especially in the realm of public school administration.

Newsome and Gentry (1984) state that elementary school principals are “confronted with situations which call for decisions about such diverse things as buildings, buses, budgets, school organizations, curriculum, student behavior, community relations, and the like” (p.138). Denig and Quinn (2001) describe the principal’s role as including such diverse responsibilities as “supervision, curriculum development, budgets, negotiations, school law, and research” (p.43). Furthermore, they propose that the “enlightened school leaders of today, and indeed for tomorrow, must possesses more than technical expertise. They must also be conversant with the moral and ethical dimension inherent in any position of educational leadership” (p.43).

Bottery (1992) believes that decisions made by school administrators are based on a set of values. His concept of ethical leadership is guided by the obligation that school leaders ask themselves the following six fundamental questions:

1. Does the management of the school promote personal growth?
2. Does it treat people as ends in themselves or as means to ends?
3. Does it foster a rationality that is not only tolerant of criticism, but actually sees it as an essential part of school and society?
4. Does it repudiate the view of human beings as resources to be manipulated,
and instead see them as resourceful humans?
5. Does it create an ethos where measures of democracy can be introduced to be replicated within the society at large?
6. Does it foster an appreciation of the place of individuals as citizens within their own communities, states and world? (pp. 5-6)

These six questions move along a continuum from issues about individual growth and development at one end, to values concerning the world community at the other. A school administrator must be concerned with the personal, social and political values of the student population and how these values help students to grow into productive citizens to be leading in a moral or ethical manner.

Strike, Haller, and Soltis (2005) discuss two central ethical principles related to educational leadership and decision-making. The first, benefit maximization, “holds that whenever we are faced with a choice, the best and most just decision is the one that results in the most good or the greatest benefit for the most people” (p.17). The second, the principle of equal respect, “requires that we act in ways that respect the equal worth of moral agents. It requires that we regard human beings as having intrinsic worth and treat them accordingly” (p.17).

Kidder and Born (2002) understand that school administrators must make many daily judgments and decisions. As such, they state that “when such dilemmas hit often without warning, on an otherwise normal day – you need to demonstrate moral authority and wise decision-making” (p.14). According to these scholars, the process of moral decision making needs four components to be successful. It must: “1) be rooted in core, shared values; 2) be centered on right versus right dilemmas rather than on right versus wrong temptations; 3) provide clear, compelling resolution principles; and 4) be infused with moral courage” (p.14).

Kidder and Born (2002) present two different kinds of ethical dilemmas. The first type is considered a right versus wrong dilemma, in which the administrator must make a decision when
one side of the dilemma is rooted in core values and the other is not. These types of decisions are quite common in school settings and can be easily resolved if the administrator follows the shared values of the school system. The more difficult decisions result from right versus right dilemmas. In these situations, both sides of the dilemma are rooted in core, shared values and the administrator must make a decision even though there could be moral backing for either decision.

Since some of the dilemmas faced by school administrators are of the right versus right kind, Kidder and Born (2002) propose three principles to help administrators make the “correct” choice in the face of two “right” options. The following three principles are involved in resolving two rights:

1. Ends-based thinking: Decisions made for the greatest good for the greatest number.
2. Rule-based thinking: Decisions made that will make the world the kind of place we all want to live in.
3. Care-based thinking: Decisions made according to the “Golden Rule”: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (p. 17).

The authors end their discussion of ethical decision making by encouraging school administrators to possess “moral courage,” since school leaders “face mental challenges that could harm one’s reputation, emotional well-being, self esteem or other characteristics.” These challenges are tied to our own core moral values (p. 18).

When making ethical and moral decisions, Kidder and Born (2002) believe that school administrators need to be in touch with their own, as well as the community’s, shared, core ethical beliefs. To identify core values important to a school community, they suggest starting with the ten commitments brought forth by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Statement of Ethics. The AASA recognizes several key core, ethical values such as “honesty, integrity, due process, responsibility, civil and human rights, and honor” (p. 15). The
AASA’s Statement of Ethics for School Administrators stresses that “an educational administrator’s professional behavior must conform to an ethical code. The code must be idealistic and at the same time practical so that it can apply reasonably to all educational administrators.”

An administrator must acknowledge that the schools belong to the public he or she serves for the purpose of providing educational opportunities to all. However, administrators assume responsibility for providing educational leadership in the school and community. This responsibility requires school leaders to maintain standards of exemplary professional conduct. It must be recognized that an administrator’s actions will be viewed by the community, professional associates and students (AASA, 2010).

Another starting point to establish and choose core, ethical values as cited in Kidder and Born (2002) is research completed in the early 1990s by the Institute for Global Ethics. Based on surveys and interviews with people from various interests and backgrounds, the Institute determined that five key values were universal in their importance to ethical and moral decision-making. These five core values are truth, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. In addition to being important to the decision-making process, Kidder (1995) recommends that these characteristics are just as vital in “identifying goals, determining objectives, creating a plan of implementation and evaluating results along the way” (p.16).

The discussion of moral decision making must be focused on the decisions, supported by core values, made by school administrators each day. Once a school administrator has determined the shared, core values of the school community, he or she can more easily engage in the process of ethical decision-making. “In general, one can determine when individuals are raising a moral question, stating a moral problem, making a moral judgment, from the kind of
substantive concepts in which they describe or argue about the situation” (Crittenden, 1984, p.17).

Principals face difficulties in making moral decisions because of many factors including: a strong commitment to do the right thing when it may be in conflict with policies and procedures, isolation within the organization, a lack of understanding by interest groups as to the rationale of the decision, and a lack of known resources to support the principal in making the decision. Starratt (2004) recommended training for principals in ethical decision making.

Owens (2001) states that:

There is a widely held expectation that persons in administrative positions will personally be decisive. What that means is far from clear but it is often taken to mean making decisions swiftly, without delay or temporizing, and clearly, with minimum ambiguity. It often also implies that the individual tends to make decisions that conform to certain accepted qualitative standards; that for example decisions are well informed and ethically acceptable. Thus, discussions of administrative decision-making often focus on the personal behaviors of individuals who are construed to be “decision makers” (pp.266-267).

Crowson (1989) studied site-level administrators and found evidence of widespread rules and directives violations. He labeled this behavior as “creative insubordination” (p.412). He described the behavior as mostly benign, such as adapting a general directive to local conditions. Sometimes, though, the behavior was mischievously counter bureaucratic as in the case of implementing a bad directive as it was, without correcting the obvious errors. Occasionally, the behavior was hierarchically deviant when the principal’s values were substituted for those organizationally intended. Crowson concluded that the corporate-incentives model (tax incentives, philanthropic, etc.) did not adequately explain the behavior of principals since they appeared to display a normal sense of responsibility that guided their behavior beyond the institutional reward structure.
Another study explored the relationship between principals’ attitudes toward their work and the frequency of incidents of creative insubordination. The researchers looked for evidence of predictors of this behavior. The study found that experienced elementary principals who were recognized as instructional leaders by their central office supervisors, and who had demonstrated competency, were more likely than others in the sample to engage in creative insubordination (Haynes & Licata, 1995).

Professional ethics and legal principles are intertwined and are culturally bound. No ethical standard or law can be adequately understood outside the cultural framework or social mores, values and norms that devise them (Winston & Saunders, 1998). Bull and McCarthy (1999) explored the importance of a knowledge base in law and ethics for educational leaders. They concluded that law and ethics are relevant to all administrative decisions. Further, they found that law and ethics provide the insights and patterns of thought necessary for quality deliberations and effective performance.

The literature suggests that administrators approach decisions in a variety of ways and in various contexts. A study which examined legal and ethical considerations used by school administrators in decision making concluded that administrators made appropriate ethical and legal decisions when issues were distinct, but made appropriate ethical decisions more often than appropriate legal decisions. In situations where ethical and legal considerations were in conflict, an ethical, illegal decision making pattern emerged (Millerborg & Hoyle, 1995; Reeves & Jones, 1999). Ethics plays a major role in daily decision making by educational administrators (Reeves & Jones, 1999).
Moral Decision-Making

The concepts of morality and moral development have been ever present in society, but the focus on moral judgment and decision-making in recent years has taken a more cognitive approach. The research of Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Rest increases understanding of the definition of morality, moral reasoning, and decision-making in societies. Kohlberg argues that “morality cannot be defined in terms of conformity with the prevailing group norms, for it remains a philosophical rather than a behavioral concept; a person’s morality cannot be assessed without knowing that person’s point of view and intentions” (Kohlberg, 1984, p.7). Gilligan (1982, 1) states that “morality is rooted in the social condition and the human psyche”. It arises from the social condition because people live in groups, and what one person does can affect another” (p.1). Accordingly, Rest believes that there must be social cooperation among people in society for conflicts to be settled and for individuals to be able to live together while receiving mutual benefits from one another. In regard to making decisions, Rest (1979) believes that “moral judgment is concerned with how the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are to be distributed (the rules of a social system that assign people’s rights and responsibilities)” (p.20).

Rest analyzes moral development based on “its successive conceptions of (a) how mutual expectations among cooperating individuals are established, and (b) how the interests of individuals are to be equilibrated” (p.20). The notion of cooperation, according to Rest and Narvaez (1994), leads to moral judgment and decision-making in the following manner:

We assume that the conceptions of cooperation are deep structures (that they are among the individual’s fundamental categories for interpreting the social world). Now imagine that a person faces some moral dilemma. The story material contains a multitude of stimuli and events. Conceptions of cooperation help the person sift among the many details to identify the most important aspects. They provide a way to link the relationships of the parties to each other and an integrating strategy for deciding which are the most important characteristics that lead to advocating some course of action as morally right. Conceptions of cooperation help a person manage all the bits and pieces of
dilemma information, and help guide what an individual ought to do (in order to sustain a particular kind of cooperation) (p.8).

For the purposes of this study, and based on Kohlberg’s (1984) research, the definition of “morality” as it relates to decision-making will not be restricted to the concepts of justice and fairness, but involves social interaction and cooperation among members of a group; it is not concerned with individual values that do not have an effect on other people. Cognitive processes are necessary to understand and solve problems within moral situations, specifically those that “help the individual identify who is affected by the situation, the precedence of various claims, and finally, what one ought to do in the concrete situation” (Rest and Narvaez, 1994, p. 199).

According to Beauchamp and Childress (1984), morality is a continuous discourse throughout the ages. Viewing morality from numerous philosophical perspectives, involves analysis of the meaning of crucial ethical terms such as “right,” “obligation,” and “responsibility (pp. 40-41). Beauchamp and Childress ask,

“How much weight do we assign to these different rights? When they come into conflict, which right takes precedence? Answers to these questions, which may ultimately be unanswerable to everyone’s satisfaction, can only come through a framework of systematic reflection on moral principles and rules, including duties, obligations and rights” (p. 63).

Beck and Murphy (1994) called on professors in educational leadership programs to move away from the teaching of ethics as a technique-driven system of problem solving principles and guidelines and toward an open dialogue about what it means to “promote moral thinking and acting” (Beck & Murphy, 1994, p. 95) in a profession characterized by complexity and ambiguity.
Ethical Frameworks

An ethical framework is a basic assumption about beliefs, values, and principles used to guide choices (Starratt, 2004). As contemporary scholars began to write about justice, critique, and care, Starratt (1994) combined these perspectives into the most recognized ethical framework in education, the tri-partite framework. The scholarship of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) can be used as a theoretical framework in understanding school principals’ perspectives about how they make ethical decisions in their work.

Shapiro and Stefkovich’s 2011 text Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas provides an extensive, diverse pedagogical view of ethics and ethical reasoning from multiple ethical paradigms. The authors purport that in our changing society the study of ethics for school leaders is essential. They suggest that, “by using the different paradigms, educators should become aware of the perspective or perspectives they tend to use most often in solving ethical issues” (p.7). Their research from years of conducting case studies is based on graduate students attending large, research universities in both urban and rural settings, many of whom were educational practitioners. The authors maintain that the practical application of the multiple ethical paradigms has overarching themes for understanding complex paradoxical dilemmas. In Shapiro and Stefkovich’s theoretical framework, the Multiple Ethical Paradigms of justice, critique, care and the profession, often become a part of the educational landscape that is encountered daily.

The Ethic of Justice

Justice serves as the foundation for legal principles and ideals, rights and laws, fairness and equity in individual freedom (Shapiro & Gross, 2002; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1994; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004). The ethic of justice requires treating others to a standard of
justice applied in all relationships. According to Starratt (1994), the idea of fairness and equal
treatment becomes the core value of the ethic of justice. Shapiro and Gross (2008) affirm that the
ethic of justice continually raises questions about the justness and fairness of laws and policies.
In addition, authors Strike, Haller, and Soltis (2005), as well as, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011),
affirm that the ethic of justice supports the principle of due process and protects the civil and
human rights of all individuals. Strike et al. (2005) maintained the effect of justice in
educational decision-making based on maximum benefits in respect to individual needs. This
supports Shapiro and Stefkovich’s proposal that school administrators who considered each
member of the community before making an ethical decision utilized the ethic of justice as they
strived to be fair and equitable. The ethic of justice mandated an analysis of the issues in terms of
the rights and laws of not only the students but all stakeholders including the parents, and school
personnel.

The Ethic of Critique

Just as the ethic of justice is about fairness, the focus of the ethic of critique is about the
barriers to fairness and based on scholars such as Apple and the writings of Foucault, Friere, and
Giroux. The ethic of critique comes from critical theory, which focuses on social class and
inequities. One of the major arguments of critical theorists is that the schools reproduce the
inequities in society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Educators who work from a critical theory
perspective seek to find a voice for those who have been silenced.

School administrators are forced to confront moral issues through the ethic of critique,
when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others, through the
equitable distribution of resources and application of rules (Furman, 2004; Freire, 1970, Giroux,
2010). The ethic of critique challenges the status quo by involving social discourse, which allows
the marginalized a voice and exposes inequities (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011). Giroux defines this ethic as one that is “guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010).

The ethic of critique focuses school administrators on an awareness of inequities in society as it pursues measures to correct laws, policies, and regulations not consistent with sound educational practices (Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). The authors confirm that the ethic of critique forces school administrators to rethink, redefine, and reframe concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and in particular, social injustice.

The Ethic of Care

The ethic of care finds its roots in feminist studies. Carol Gilligan (1982) first explored an ethic of care when refuting Kohlberg’s use of justice and progression through stages in resolving moral dilemmas. Nell Noddings (1992) affirms that “the first job of schools is to care for children” (p. 16). Noddings (1992) goes further to say that we cannot separate education from personal experience by expressing, “Who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter, in what we value, and how we approach intellectual moral life” (p. xiii). An ethic of care, according to Noddings (1992), reflects our memories of caring and being cared for. The ethic of care brings the focus of moral decision making to how the individuals involved are treated. Caring involves stepping beyond one’s own frame of reference into the other’s and is characterized by moving away from one’s self (Mitten, 1996). In an ethic of care, one responds to another out of love or natural inclination, the focus becomes connectedness and relationships
(Mitten, 1996). True caring and understanding of others has been shown to aid in their empowerment (Mitten, 1996).

The ethic of care emerges out of the ethic of justice and shifts the focus from rights and laws to compassion and empathy (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Furman (2004) notes the ethic of care balances the ethic of justice and critique as it is less concerned with fairness and more concerned with caring for individuals as unique persons. The ethic of care requires absolute regard for the dignity and intrinsic value of each person based on relationships and demands care and respect in relationships with others (Noddings, 2003).

In her 1995 article, Noddings expresses that “Caring is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likeable. Caring implies a continuous search for competence. When we care, we want to do our very best for the objects of our care” (p.2). Noddings emphasizes that “caring educators must help students make wise decisions” (p.4). Noddings (1988) in her research further explains the ethic of care, as “moral education, from the perspective of an ethic of caring, involves modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation” (p.222). This is evidenced in the decision making processes of elementary school principals.

School administrators utilize the ethic of care through relationships they value and connections in the ethical decision-making process, as they try to balance power with caring, nurturing, and encouraging students, rather than focusing on rules and techniques. (Sernak, 1998) School administrators who utilize the ethic of care consider how they could help an individual student meet his or her needs and desires before reaching an ethical decision.

The Ethic of the Profession

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggest that the ethical frameworks of justice, critique, and care need expanding. The authors call for school leaders to consider professional codes and
personal ethical principles, as well as standards of the profession, and create a dynamic model that places the best interests of the student at the heart of the ethics of the educational profession (Stefkovich, 2006, Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) note, that the ethic of the profession often means codes, rules, and principles, all of which align with the traditional concepts of justice, but they sustain their interpretation of the ethic of the profession takes into account other paradigms such as professional judgment and professional decision-making.

In the role as educational leaders, the ethic of the profession has an overarching goal pertaining to the decision making process, particularly for school principals in how they make ethical decisions in their work. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) write that: “In this era, schools have been asked to shoulder many of the responsibilities of society. This trend does not look as if it will cease and it probably will grow. With this trend come more paradoxes and dilemmas” (p.23). This trend has developed to include the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), high stakes testing and school reform. The authors explain that a code applied in one stage of life need not be the same over time. The ethic of the profession expects “leaders to formulate and examine their own professional codes of ethics in light of individual personal codes of ethics, as well as standards set forth by the profession, and then calls on them to place students at the center of the ethical decision-making process” (p.23).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) best summarize the ethical frameworks as they suggest the ethic of justice includes equality and equity, while the ethic of care challenges impartiality and detachment, replacing it with compassion and equity. They continue that the ethic of critique raises questions concerning the treatment of diverse groups in society. Finally, they suggest that
the ethic of the profession continually questions equity and the evolving needs of students, and that a combination of both supports the best interests of the student.

Shapiro and Stefkovich draw from Nash’s (1996) perspective in that he raises several questions pertaining to this paradigm. For example, “what are we to make of this almost universal disparagement of professional codes of ethics? What does the nearly total disregard of professional codes mean?” (Nash, 1996, p.34) Nash (1996) emphasized the need to train teachers in ethics. He described conceptions of ethics and their implications for developing the teacher’s ability to make careful moral decisions.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) conclude that those professional codes of ethics serve as guideposts for the profession, giving statements about its image and character. By that, Shapiro and Stefkovich contend that this paradigm needs to be viewed more broadly, more inclusively, and more contemporarily. These authors believe that the school leader’s perspective is critical in decision-making and acknowledge the importance of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. A guidepost for school leaders is established from the ISLLC Standards in connection to the decision making process. As a whole, principals should use professional codes but need to draw upon ethical decision-making practices.

Thus, taking all these factors into consideration, Shapiro and Stefkovich’s ethic of the profession would have administrators ask questions within the justice, critique, and care paradigms, but would have them go beyond these questions to ask what the profession would expect and what is in the best interests of the students taking into account the fact that they may represent highly diverse populations (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011, p. 25). Their book presents several case studies involving dilemmas faced by school leaders, with accompanying questions
designed to promote reflective thinking among graduate level students studying school leadership.

Shapiro and Stefkovich believe that practical application of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm (MEP) has a direct relational connection for understanding complex paradoxical dilemmas. When these conflicts become apparent in the multitude of issues that arise throughout the principal’s school day; they should consider one or more of these ethical frameworks is used.

Therefore, conducting this study through the theoretical framework of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), this research critically analyzes similarities and differences among twelve rural public elementary school principals in relation to decision making, focusing on a leadership perspective. The MEPs of justice, critique, care and the profession will be employed in this study. These critical attributes have been chosen as the conceptual framework for this study, which examines ethics and ethical reasoning with a focus on rural elementary principals, a group rarely studied, in order to fill a gap in the ethical decision making literature.

**Case Studies**

A case is a bounded event, part of a system (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is common to realize certain elements of a case occur within the system and others occur outside (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). One of the most significant outside features is context. Furthermore, boundedness and patterns are useful concepts for determining the case. This study explored rural principals within the system that is the school district; however, outside elements of the rural context are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of study. According to Denzin and Lincoln, a case study is the process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry. In other words, a case study is studying a particular phenomenon at one time in one specific setting.
Cases of a particular phenomenon may be similar or dissimilar (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Cases are chosen because it is believed that by understanding them it will lead to better understanding of a larger collection of cases. Case study researchers seek to understand what is common and also what is different about the case, but the end result of research often focuses on the differences. This study used a sample of twelve rural elementary school principals. By looking at commonalities and differences, the researcher was able to explore the research questions guiding this study.

Issues are complicated with many variables and relationships to be considered. Case study researchers orient themselves to the complexities of the case connecting practices to abstractions. Researchers focus on foreshadowed problems, conduct observations, and interpret data patterns. In this study, the researcher focused on the rural context and the educational leaders within. The researcher foreshadowed the problems presented by the rural context like the concern for justice within a known community, one in which the principals resided in and understood the familial backgrounds of the students, that might affect the ethical decision-making of educational leaders.

A case study can be seen as one item to be studied as imbedded in a number of contexts or backgrounds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Historical context, cultural context and physical context are essential. Contexts can go a long way toward making the relationships understood. Case study research requires understanding these complexities. Sequence of events and coincidence are more important than determining causal relationships. Inquiry designs are the favored approach for most case studies. The case study can be seen as one step toward generalization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), generalization is not the guiding focus.
Researchers spend time on site immersed in the field. Most case study research is richly descriptive and is done with intrinsic interest in the field. There rich data allow the researcher to communicate complex meanings in a concise report (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

**Summary**

It has been several years since scholars called for reform in principal preparation programs. Little change occurred during this time. The literature supports the view that educators have high expectations to behave ethically. The principal preparation research tends to be sporadic and responsive rather than innovative and evidential. This collective literature is still overwhelmingly descriptive instead of explanatory. The literature supports the view that while ethics in educational leadership education is deemed important, it is nevertheless neglected. The literature is more robust with argument and rationale than with evidence of the effects of reform in principal preparedness for ethical decision-making. Most of the existing research is limited to case study designs, small sample sizes, and self-reported methodologies. The large-scale quantitative studies that do exist in leadership are focused more on business leadership, not on principals and their ethical decision-making.

The literature reveals a void in ethical coursework requirements for education majors. Evident is the need for a careful study of ethics and ethical coursework for future school administrators. With the demands for schools to respond to increasing societal and cultural problems, demands for accountability, and a retiring baby boomer workforce in school leadership, equally evident is the need for careful study of principals and their ethical decision-making processes.

This chapter provided a review of the literature related to the educational rural context of morality and moral thought, the concept of decision-making in regard to education leadership
and the importance of moral decision-making to the principalship. Denig and Quinn (2001) propose that the way in which ethical dilemmas are resolved “is contingent on the administrators’ training, value system and approaches to moral decisions” (p.44).

According to Sherblom (2008), the most important justice-care debate involved Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues on one hand and the care-theorists (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; 1992; 1996) on the other hand. Kohlberg (1969) introduced his cognitive-developmental theory in the 1960s, and by the late 1970s, his approach became the dominant theory in moral philosophy and moral psychology (Sherblom 2008). The dialogue between Kohlberg who emphasized justice-reasoning and the proponents of the ethics of care dominated the focus of moral psychology from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s.

The debate over alternative ways of conceptualizing moral discussions showed care theorists differing from justice-based developmentalists philosophically, psychologically, and methodologically. According to Sherblom (2008), by the 1990s, the conceptual dominance of Kohlberg’s approach had begun to decline due to challenges from theorists who supported care ethics and a more holistic and relational approach to education. The care challenge to the justice reasoning model did not totally dismiss the justice model but attempted to integrate aspects of a care-based moral response into a broader conception of moral development (Sherblom, 2008).

In a model that describes the ethic of justice as an educational perspective focusing on rights, law, and policies, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2010) detail justice as part of the liberal democratic tradition that adheres to trust in the legal system and in progress to provide fairness, equality, and individual freedom. According to the ethic of justice, educational leaders should be able to rely on laws and policies for guidance in a just society where the government is committed to the principles of tolerance, respect, and fair treatment of all people.
From Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2010) point of view, justice is not a rule or a set of rules, but a moral principle, a mode or choosing that is universal. It is a rule of choosing that people should adopt in all situations. From this perspective, education is not value-free because schools should teach the principles of justice, equity, and respect for liberty.

On the other hand, Shapiro and Stefkovich advise that educational leaders can make changes in their schools “using a number of lenses and/or approaches” (p. 47). Thus, educators can turn to the ethic of justice, critique, care based on Noddings (1992; 2002; 2003) and the profession in order to develop a school with an ethical curriculum based on the four frameworks organized around themes of justice, critique, care, and the profession rather than traditional discipline.

Many believed the absence of training in ethical decision making was a disadvantage for school leaders (Beck, 1996; Fenstermaker, 1996; Nash, 1991; Reeves & Jones, 1999). Nash (1991) emphasized the need to train teachers in ethics. He described ethics and discussed implications for developing the teacher’s ability to make caring and careful moral decisions.

The aim of this study is to further examine moral decision-making, and to determine the frameworks at which public rural elementary school principals are making moral and ethical decisions in light of the many dilemmas faced each day in the school setting. A gap exists in the literature relating to rural education. Educational leadership has been studied in depth, but few studies focus on rural settings and even less research is conducted on elementary principals in rural settings. The essential component of this study is to further explore this phenomenon.
Chapter III

Methodology

In this study, qualitative research methodologies were used. This study was conducted using specific methods of a demographic questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The focus was on twelve rural elementary school principals in Pennsylvania. The emerging data in this study was analyzed using the Multiple Ethical paradigms (MEP) of justice, critique, care and the profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011). This research began with an overall question; how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions related to their work? Sub questions analyzed general assumptions about ethics and ethical reasoning from school principals’ perspectives.

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe individual principals’ experiences of ethical decision-making in rural settings. The hypothesis is that many school principals have had experiences when they were forced to make a tough decision that challenged them to take a position in spite of competing moral values. The researcher sought to know how they resolved this dilemma, what their thought process was and what values were brought up. Fuller understandings of these encounters via four vignettes were presented. Robert J. Starratt (1994, 2004) writes that “many ethical problems have no easy solution” and urges that “research be undertaken to gain a better understanding of the personal struggles of those who must make difficult moral choices” (Starratt, 1994, ix). It was with this desire to contribute to the current understanding of the ethical dimensions of school leadership that the researcher took up this study.
Sampling

The defined population in this study was principals of public elementary schools in rural Central Pennsylvania. The Center for Rural PA defines a school district as being rural when the people per square mile is less than 284 (CRPA, 2010). For the purpose of this study, an elementary school was defined as a public school with students between the grades of Kindergarten to Eighth Grade. Twelve rural elementary principals were selected.

Creswell states, “in a phenomenological study, the participants. . . must be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences” (2009, p.111). In attempting to locate participants, the researcher began with several considerations. The researcher sought out current elementary school principals who would be willing to be interviewed for at least one continuous hour and be audio taped. The researcher found principals representing both genders, with a variety of lengths of tenure and socio-economic demographics of rural school communities in central Pennsylvania.

Creswell suggests that in phenomenological research, the number of interviewees be “up to ten people” (2009, p. 112). In addition, the question of how many participants to include was limited due to the researchers’ time constraints and proximity to location. I am cognizant of the fact that the researcher’s own decision making was not the real issue under study, it simply presented a backdrop against which she tried to understand the phenomena as experienced by the participants.

Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. It was both descriptive and deductive in nature, and it sought to understand the phenomenon that was the rural elementary school principal. Merriam (1998) asserts, that “qualitative research can help us to see how all of
the parts work together to form a whole” (p. 6). The product of qualitative research is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). This study allowed the researcher to coping with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many variables involved beyond the control of the researcher (Wiersma, 2001).

Culture essentially refers to beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people (Merriam, 1998). Because leadership did not occur in a vacuum, the culture of the individual schools and the surrounding community plays a part in understanding the leader’s decision making strategies. This was further explained and discussed in the literature review. Since the purpose of the study was exploratory and descriptive, interview research methods were utilized extensively. Qualitative methods produce quality, in depth and contextual richness in the findings which could not be generated through a quantitative (survey research) design (Wiersma, 2001).

The investigator relied on a semi-structured, in-depth interview as a primary method of data collection (McCraken, 1988). The interview was used to look for salient themes, patterns, and categories in the principals’ perceptions and practices of ethical decision making. In addition, the investigator explored how these patterns were linked. The investigator described in a narrative format four vignettes to which each elementary school principal responded. The same four questions were asked at the end of each vignette (See Appendix B). The investigator then coded the descriptive responses for similarities and differences in decision making and whether or not there were ethical considerations. The researcher used at first words that led the researcher to think in terms of the four ethical frameworks, but then used phrases to code the text of the transcripts. The researcher is specifically trying to understand whether or not the
responses were based on ethical frameworks as proposed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). The four frameworks are justice, critique, care and the profession.

**Demographics**

An initial questionnaire was distributed prior to conducting the interviews to understand demographic information of Pennsylvania rural elementary public school principals. The questionnaire (Appendix A) asked the participants their age, sex, race, educational level: Master’s/Ph.d/Other, years of experience, and finally their formal ethics training, if any.

**The Vignettes/Instrumentation**

Three of the four vignettes were taken directly from Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) text *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education*. They were re-written for concision and time constraints of the elementary school principals. The last one was created in order to make sure that each of the four frameworks: justice, critique, care and the profession were represented as meaningful in a contemporary elementary school leadership setting. The investigator did not want the interview process to take longer than 60 minutes, so as to ensure a higher degree of participation among the selected elementary school principals.

This was done to explore the decision making processes school principals utilize. The questions were formulated by the researcher based on this study’s research questions. The interview questions were written to be clear in focus and design, but flexible enough to uncover the unexpected (Kerlinger, 1986). The investigator was interested in the participants’ understanding of ethical decision-making and formulated the interview questions to encourage
information to unfold as the participant lived it. Participants were allowed and encouraged to respond in any way they wish.

Questions were posed in language that was clear and meaningful. They were focused and were not leading. Each contained a one main idea and was open ended (McCraken, 1988). The questions at the end of each vignette were answered orally they were the following:

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the principal do? (if necessary, probe for why/justification)
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or “downsides” are there to your action/decision?

The participants’ responses were recorded and analyzed. These questions were piloted with a retired elementary school principal. The retired principal was given the demographics questionnaire, then asked to read each vignette and answer the four questions at the end of each vignette. The interview lasted two hours, the length was judged to be appropriate and reasonable. The retired principal explained the questions should be concise and the same for each vignette so as to make the process simple and easy to understand. The interview questions were revised on the basis of information gathered through the pilot interview.

**Discussion of the Research Questions**

In this study, the investigator explored how selected elementary school principals experienced the phenomenon of decision-making when faced with an ethical dilemma and describe the essential meanings that they brought to the experience upon reflection. The investigator structured the study around the framework of phenomenological inquiry because the researcher was interested in learning about the experiences of the participants as they were engaged in an experience: decision-making when faced with an ethical dilemma in their principalship. Twelve participants were selected to be interviewed. The participants were rural
elementary school principals in central Pennsylvania who were able and were willing to reflect upon their knowhow through the vignettes.

Moustakas writes, “the aim (of phenomenological research) is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (1994, p.13). These questions were designed to provide a complete, textured portrayal of the ethical dilemma as the focus of the study.

Following Moustakas’ methods for phenomenological research, the researcher engaged in the following steps:

1. Formulated overarching questions that have “both social meaning and personal significance” (Moustakas, 1994, 104). Identify several research questions that form the framework of the overall inquiry.

2. Described the perspectives behind phenomenological research, that is, “the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2009, p.54). This includes a description of the researcher’s own preconceptions about the topic as a necessary first step toward understanding how they might influence the inquiry.

3. Formulated interview questions that led the principals to provide a textured explanation of the rationale for decision making and uncover the critical meanings therein;

4. Collected data through semi-structured interviews, using research questions as a basis for the discourse; audio-tape and transcribe interviews.

5. Analyzed the data through a process that comprised listing and grouping of every expression related to the vignette, reduction of overlapping and indistinguishable expressions;
6. Constructed for each person an Individual Textural Description of the answers, that is, a
description of the answers (Moustakas, 1994, pp.120-1).

The final outcome of the research emerged as a “complete description of the meanings and
essences of the experience, representing the group (selected rural elementary school principals)
as a whole” (Moustakas, p. 121).

Data Collection Procedures

The investigator communicated with each participant by mail, phone and email to discuss
the purpose of the study and to request and encourage participation, to build rapport, and to
reassure the principals’ confidentiality in the use of the data that was collected. Each participant
was sent an IRB Informed Consent Letter (Appendix C) confirming that participation was
voluntary, that the interview would be kept confidential, and that s/he agreed to participate. The
letter included the scheduled date and time for the interview.

The interviews were conducted at the schools where the principals served so as to provide
a familiar environment. All of the interviews lasted at least one hour. The participants were
asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) prior to beginning the interview
and the questionnaire remained available until the interview was completed, should the
participant desire to comment further in writing on this study. Effective probing (McCraken,
1988) was used to produce more complete information and to gain further elaboration,
exploration, clarification and completion of detail. A conversational mode was used to conduct
the interviews (Marshall and Rossman, 1995).

The interviews were audio taped and the tapes were transcribed onto a laptop computer
secured with a password. Principals were offered the transcription of his/her own interview and
allowed to edit or add to the transcripts. Transcripts were mailed to the principals along with the demographic questionnaire and a handwritten note of appreciation.

The transcript of each interview was analyzed. The researcher looked for themes, patterns and categories in the principals’ answers. In addition, the researcher explored if and how these patterns link with one another and whether they are indicative of a particular ethical framework (justice, critique, care and the profession).

The main work of the researcher was to achieve the best possible explanation of the phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon of study was rural elementary school leadership. The researcher found a purposeful sample for intense study. Twelve participants were selected to be interviewed based on the following criteria:

- participants will be principals in a public school setting;
- principals at the elementary school level (K-8);
- reside in a geographically isolated area;
- reside in rural area;
- reside in central Pennsylvania.

The schools were in counties with high poverty and unemployment rates as labeled by the Center for Rural PA (CRPA, 2010). The school populations had over 50% low income students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

This qualitative study focused on twelve elementary school principals working in rural public school districts within central Pennsylvania. The Center for Rural PA defines a school district as being rural when the people per square mile is less than 284 (CRPA, 2010). Since the 500 school districts fall into three primary categories: urban, suburban, and rural, the principals were selected exclusively from rural districts. Within Pennsylvania, at the school district level,
235 of the state’s 500 public school districts are rural. During the 2008-2009 school year, more than 458,300 public school students or 26 percent of the state’s nearly 1.79 million public school students, attended school in a rural district. Within the 500 districts in Pennsylvania, there are 4,636 elementary schools. Six female principals and six male principals will be selected to participate. Principals from three counties in central Pennsylvania will be selected for this study. The three counties included a total of 11 rural school districts. Defining elements of this particular rural context was that all of the counties were mountainous and subject to geographic isolation; each of the three counties had at least three exclusive districts. The districts ranged in size from 624 students to 2,722 students (CRPA, 2010).

The principals were selected from schools that are geographically isolated with the help of the Pennsylvania School Study Council and its head, Lawrence Wess. Districts will be purposely selected from mountainous areas of Pennsylvania. These areas are isolated from major metropolitan areas. The districts all had low population densities. This was done intentionally to allow the researcher to explore concerns related to geographic isolation. The principals were selected through access to public records compiled by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The researcher selected initially twenty potential subjects that met the criteria mentioned above. Ten potential male candidates and ten potential female candidates were identified from the pool of rural elementary school administrators working in Pennsylvania. By identifying ten potential subjects, the researcher was able to have back-up candidates if the initial subjects declined to partake or if one decided to drop out of this research after giving consent.

The initial contact with the principals was made by telephone or email by Lawrence Wess, then followed up by the researcher. This was done to ensure participation since Dr. Wess had already established a good working relationship with the majority of principals in central
Pennsylvania. Subjects for this study were chosen through purposeful sampling from the pool of rural elementary school principals in central Pennsylvania. The principals’ gender, rural status, and elementary school level were the three exclusive criteria used in the selection process.

The use of a computer database was implemented to organize and maintain all of the records. Interview notes, audio recordings and transcribed interviews were collected or maintained throughout the course of the study. Database technology was used to record and maintain adequate records of the data. The researcher used a systematic approach to collect data.

Twelve rural elementary school principals provided the researcher with rich data from twelve perspectives. According to Merriam (1998), the question of how many people to interview depends on the questions guiding the research study (Merriam, 1998). Twelve principals, six male and six female, was a feasible number for this study in that it allowed the researcher to maintain data that was rich and explanatory. The researcher used purposeful sampling from the population of rural elementary school principals in Pennsylvania, and the research questions guiding the study remained a central focus in determining the cases. The cases selected reflected the average person in the situation of the study (Merriam, 1998).

By studying twelve elementary school principals in rural central Pennsylvania, the researcher explored the phenomenon of rural elementary school leadership including rural principals’ perceptions regarding the impact of the rural context as it related to their ethical leadership, decision making, gender, and personal history. This study explored this phenomenon in the context of rural schools, in the selected Pennsylvania locations, at the time of study.
The Role of the Researcher

In order for the researcher to be successful certain key characteristics were crucial. Because of the nature of qualitative research, the researcher must have a high tolerance for ambiguity. The use of interviewing requires the researcher to be sensitive and a good communicator (Maxwell, 2005).

In this study, the investigator was the primary instrument of the research (Maxwell, 2005). Thus, the researcher’s personal background was of interest in that she was originally from a rural area and experienced public education in a suburban setting. The investigator was a full-time graduate student and was formerly a high school teacher. According to Maxwell (2005), traditionally what researchers bring to the research from their background and identity has been treated as bias, the influence of which needs to be eliminated from the design rather than a valuable component of it. However, separating the research from other aspects of the investigator’s life can cut her off from major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks (Maxwell, 2005). The context of a study is defined by Maxwell (2005) as the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform the research. The researcher’s background added to the contextual concept of the study and became an important element in the research design. In this case the researcher was aware of her perspective and her background, and rather than creating a bias, her background became an aide in the data collection and served as a source of internal validity as part of the analysis procedure.

Within the technical procedures of this study, the researcher participated as an interviewer. The researcher conducted the interviews on site at the school. The researcher was primarily an onlooker within the school setting. The role of the researcher as an interviewer was interactive in that she revealed her identity as a high school educator, to the participants.
Anonymity is another area of concern in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). In this study, all of the participants received full disclosure of the researcher’s purpose and methods in conducting this study. All participants signed the consent form which detailed the procedures and purposes of the study. In disseminating results of the research, the investigator used fictitious names for all participants and physical locations involved in the study. The researcher omitted any information considered to be identifiable in nature. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of the study, anonymity was assured of all of respondents. Schools and school districts were described only in terms of demographic data. Districts and respondents were referred to as numbers, e.g. Principal One, Two, etc., and all possible steps were taken to insure the respondents’ rights to privacy. To further protect the confidentiality of the participants, the researcher was the only person to have access to the written and recorded records associated with conducting the research, which remained in a locked filing cabinet drawer.

A final consideration for this study focused on the type of information shared in the semi-structured interviews. Because of the relationships that develop between the interviewer and the subject, it is possible that the subject shared personal information or sensitive information that they otherwise would not have disclosed. For this purpose, follow up contact with the participants was used as a source of validation and also to allow the subject to review the data collected. The researcher honored all requests by the participants for identifying information to be omitted.
Chapter IV

RESULTS

Introduction

In the United States 28 percent of schools are rural, and within those rural districts seven million students attend schools (Sherwood, 2005; CRPA, 2005). Only a few institutes of higher education identify rural leadership as a separate area of study. This study explored the rural context through the perceptions of twelve elementary school principals in central Pennsylvania. Throughout this chapter those perceptions will be described across several areas of inquiry.

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the twelve elementary school principals who were interviewed. The second part of this chapter outlines the participants’ responses to the vignettes with perceptions on the rural context as a whole. Specifically, the second part of this chapter will explore principals’ resolutions to the vignettes and the data collected across four areas of inquiry: the rural context, ethics training, gender, and ethical decision-making. The rest of this chapter will focus on data analysis, ethical decision making as well as the findings of the resolutions of the four vignettes.

As previously stated, the research questions guiding this study focuses on the principals’ resolutions to the vignettes related to leading in the rural context. Specifically, this study sought to explore one overall question: how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions related to their work? This study seeks to explore the standards, ethical frameworks, and processes utilized by elementary school principals in making ethical decisions.

Within that question, four supporting areas of focus were explored: In addition, this study will address the following related questions:

1. Do ethical factors emerge when administrators provide answers to vignettes of real life dilemmas in schools?
2. Were the decisions principals made regarding the ethical dilemma vignettes governed by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, how?

3. Which ethical framework, justice, critique, care or the profession, if any, do these principals use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas in the vignettes?

4. Do rural elementary school principals perceive the rural context as affecting their ability to make difficult ethical decisions? If so, how?

The purpose of this study was to explore twelve rural elementary school principals’ perceptions relative to how they make difficult ethical decisions. In this chapter a brief contextual overview is provided of the communities and the schools in which each of the twelve principals lead. To explore the research questions guiding this study, 12 site visits were made on location in Pennsylvania; three principals were interrupted and the researcher had to return to complete the interviews.

Data collected came from the completion of a demographics questionnaire and one semi-structured interview lasting anywhere from one and a half to two and a half hours as well as the researcher’s own observations. Although they tell very different stories, the twelve principals’ reactions, fall essentially under one of four themes. These include ethical struggles that principals felt over student removal, religious accommodations, teacher discipline and subverting personal feelings for a professional standard.

A pool of elementary school principals were identified through the Pennsylvania School Study Council and the Pennsylvania Department of Education that included rural, public elementary schools. Thirty-two principals were selected including twenty females and twelve
males. Twenty initial participant contacts, as stated earlier was deemed insufficient in order to get the minimum number required, twelve to complete this study. The investigator communicated with each potential participant by telephone to discuss the purpose of the study and to request the principal’s participation. Twelve responded positively, six females and six males. Participants were assured confidentiality with respect to the collected data. A letter and an email confirming the date of the scheduled interview and the demographics data questionnaire, Appendix A, were sent out following the telephone conversation. The questionnaire was then collected during the interview visit. Appendix D indicates descriptive information concerning the twelve participants.

The investigator discovered that having each principal sit for a couple of hours to discuss the fulfillment and disappointments of the application of educational administration quite enriching. Since the focus of this study is how elementary school principals make their decisions, the investigator will not describe each principal’s individual character as the resolution to the vignette is the objective of this study.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher’s initial attempts at data analysis began with the construction of the individual (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher looked at each participant’s transcripts and pulled together a story with a beginning, middle, and end for each vignette. Initially (with the first two participants), the researcher tried to separate the “individual textural” from the “individual structural” accounts, consistent with Moustakas’ methods (p.121). According to this model, the experience of the phenomenon is described first and only in terms of explicit events. This “individual” account is a description of underlying dynamics of the experience or “how the event
was experienced” (Creswell, p. 148). The researcher found, however, in examining the participants’ stories, that the two accounts were inextricably linked and as a result re-analyzed the first two participants and the remaining ones merging the accounts with the experience.

Participants gave detailed accounts of the resolution of the vignettes through their experiences, but the underlying dynamics of the experience were part of its innate nature. Attempting to perform the initial data analysis while purposefully extricating the resolution from the underlying experiences, thoughts, feelings, fears, etc., felt unnatural to the researcher. For participants three through twelve, and later one and two, the researcher constructed what Weiss would call individual participant studies (1994, p.168), or what Moustakas referred to as “composite” descriptions (p.121). This is different from the form of qualitative research called “case study” in that the unit of analysis remains the phenomena under study, not the person, and as such is devoid of much of the context afforded to formal case studies.

The method used was consistent with Moustakas’ model in that “some phenomenologists vary this approach by incorporating personal meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) by using single-subject analysis before intersubject analysis and by analyzing the role of the context in the process (Giorgi, 1975, cited in Creswell, p. 55).

In making sense of the data, a matrix was constructed of categories of meaning based on the context of the participants’ comments, see Table 1 below. See Table 2 for the ethical framework results. Possibilities included examining the nature of the dilemma through Harding’s definition. To be a dilemma, an argument must demand resolution in the course of daily life (Harding, 1985). Harding focuses on the process of thought through which “individuals come to interpret events as dilemmas” (Harding, 1985, p. 43). That is, to identify the participants’ intentions from the contradictions, or in this study, the obstacles. Other possibilities included
identifying the nature of the dilemmas as conflicts of duties or moral sentiments. Although this study is not intended to be a discourse analysis, the researcher did pay careful attention to the language of the participants used in their narratives, using Nash’s (2002) framework for categorizing moral language.

**Table 1**

**Evaluation Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Criteria</th>
<th>Principal’s Supporting Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>[There are] certain legal requirements that need to be met, utilize legal precedents; follow up with legal advice; standards should be adhered to; federal policy; it is my duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique</td>
<td>Handicap students should be given priority; handicap students need to be given more; need to provide professional development for staff to be better prepared to relate to deaf students; differentiated learning should be given and made a priority; accommodations for cultures, religious beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>Need to have concern and respect for others; need to create an upbeat and cheerful atmosphere; parents comment on teachers concern for their children;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>This is the responsibility of school management; need to adhere to district curriculum frameworks; school codes for this; should be sent to appropriate school committee; need to have PTA involvement; should let superintendent know about this; school board criteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narrative Analysis

The language we use to narrate our ethical dilemmas, the way we tell ourselves and others what’s going on in the world, is not necessarily the language we use to analyze and resolve those dilemmas. The former tends to be flexible, subjective, artistic. The latter tends to be firm, objective, even scientific… At times, it can seem so fuzzy, amorphous, and slippery as to contribute little to our understanding. At other times, it can seem so rigid and buttoned-down that the understanding it conveys, while accurate, is hardly worth having…Ethics is, at bottom, a verbal activity. (Kidder, 1995, p. 176)

In this work with the participants, and certainly in analyzing the transcripts, their responses came to light as “telling stories”, something more than asking questions and getting answers. Mischler states, “A general assumption of narrative analysis is that telling stories is one of the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning” (1986, p.67). He cites Gee’s (1985, p.11) assertion that “one of the primary ways, probably the primary way, human beings make sense of their experience is by casting it in a narrative form” (Mischler, 1986, p. 67-8).

Although the researcher was prepared with the interview questions, she found that most of the participants easily launched into a narrative format which included most of the data the researcher was looking for, embedded in the recounting of their experiences as public school administrators. More importantly, stepping back and allowing the participants room to tell their stories allowed them in turn to focus on what they experienced to be important phenomena, without having to limit themselves to the researcher’s imposed framework.

Mischler delineates problems inherent in narrative analysis, namely, differentiating between “one story with related subplots or a series of different stories” (1986, p. 73). Where does the story begin or end? The nature of these topics guided the participants to keep their narratives bounded to one story. Narratives were sometimes non-linear in the sequence of
events, or the introduction of major characters, but it was not too difficult to step back and reconstruct the events of the vignettes based on the semantic cues of their accounts.

**Analyzing Data Through Language**

The language of ethical decision making is often characterized by words such as “ought,” “right,” “fair,” “just,” and “equitable.” In *Real World Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Professionals* (2002, p. 198), R. J. Nash categorizes all moral discourse into one of three “languages”.

According to Nash, the First Moral Language is that which originates in a person’s background beliefs, those taken-for-granted notions of how the world is or how the world ought to be. Sergiovanni refers to these as “mindscapes” (1992, p. 7). These assumptions often go unnoticed in all but the most reflective people but as, Nash asserts, they provide the foundation from which individual ethical thought emanates. This first Moral Language inhabits the “metaphysical life-space” of the individual and is the central “moral vantage point” (Nash, 2002, p. 37) that provides an initial reference point for ethical decision making.

Nash describes the Second Moral Language as that of virtuosity of character. People speak in the Second Moral Language when they talk about themselves, who they are as moral agents, and how this shapes their moral decision making. Contrasting this layer of language with the “thinner” layers of beliefs and principles, Nash calls this a “thick” language (2002, p. 58). Within this language, people use terms related to “virtue, narrative, community, feelings, structures, and ideals” (Nash, p. 61). Central to the Second Moral Language is the idea that people grow into their moral selves, and continue to grow throughout the life span. Reminiscent of Aristotle’s view, it is less concerned with the question “What should I do?” than with “Who shall I be?” (Thompson, 1955) Doing the right thing has less to do with appealing to the correct
rule or principle and more to do with preserving one’s moral integrity. When engaged in this layer of language, people will talk about whether or not an action was “in character” or “out of character” for them (Nash, p. 67). How people feel about themselves in response to an ethical decision reveals the kind of moral person they strive to be, or their personal moral “ideal” (Nash, p. 78). Intuition is of primary importance here.

When speaking of their bases for ethical decision-making in the Second Moral Language, people will talk of their moral identities as being shaped by the important communities in their lives, including ethnic heritage, religion, and family. They may describe a “moral exemplar” (Nash, 2002, p. 79) or narrate an experience, either as an active participant or witness, that served as a catalyst for personal moral growth.

Nash describes the Third Moral Language in terms of rules, principles, and theories. Abstracted from the human experience, it is a “thin” language made necessary by the diversity inherent in a “secular, pluralist” world. When people speak of moral principles, they may use “simple maxims” or rules such as “practice what you preach” or “accept responsibility for your choices” (Nash, 2002, p. 110). However, phrased, formal principles such as “autonomy, veracity, fidelity, nonmaleficence, which is the ethical principle of doing no harm, justice, confidentiality, and promise-keeping” are typically at the root (Nash, p. 111). These moral principles come from some kind of irrefutable universal law, such as “natural law” or God (Nash, p. 111).
Moral Language in Principals

In the examination of the participants' stories, it has been kept in mind that they were speaking in all three moral languages as “multidimensional moral agents who (were) potentially trilingual in their ethical decision-making” (Nash, 2002, p. 147). Four of the participants, Principals Three, Four, Six, and Eleven, who began in the Third Moral Language category became “trilingual” as they became more comfortable with the researcher and as they progressed in solving more of the vignettes. They weaved themselves from Third to First to Second and again through these languages with ease. It should be noted that they are also the oldest in age and have the most years of experience.

Using Nash’s Second Language of Moral Character, the attribute of being, “non-judgmental” appears as a desirable trait for five of the twelve principals. Principals Five, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Twelve fell into the Second category. They want very much to be non-judgmental people. They believe that they had the opportunity to be advised by non-judgmental supervisors and now after many years of experience they believe that they are non-judgmental. Some of these principals explained the role of the school community and their peers as shaping their growth as administrators. Yet others spoke of a religious community that influenced the way that they currently make decisions. They spoke of a grandfather or mother as having shaped their morality. But none of them spoke of universality of morals or the Golden Rule as a guiding principle as did the principals in this next category.

Principals One, Two, Three, Four, Six, Ten and Eleven fall into Nash’s Third Moral Language. They consistently and repeatedly spoke of principles and universal laws and maxims. These principals spoke of tolerance of all students, mutual respect for others, and rights of disadvantaged students. When invoking moral principles to support ethical decision-making,
these individuals stated that the principle itself is that which provides ultimate authority. It should be noted that these administrators who fall into this Third category are the oldest principals interviewed, except for Principal One, age 42, who was also a Pastor. The rest of the principals in this Third category were all over 50 years of age. “We all have the same morals and values; it is important to make our decisions as principals with these in mind” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012).

Nash explains that, “good ethical decision-making incorporates all three moral languages” (Nash, 2002, p. 147). Nash criticizes people like Noddings because he says that they fail to purposefully integrate background beliefs, moral character, and abstract ethical principles in their decision-making theory. Feminist models of ethics, in particular, come under his scrutiny for their distaste of “masculine” and “hierarchical” formal principles of ethical reasoning. He explains that people are “multidimensional moral agents” (Nash, 2002, p. 147). “You evolve into this greater human being that can just step back and see this as a universal moral issue, not just one that affects Johnny, Tina or Ken” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012).

**Administrative Decisions**

The interview began with a general question: What is decision-making? This was done to start a conversation around ethical decision-making. The administrators discussed various daily, periodic and annual decisions they made. They included budget, assessments, calendar, policies, hiring, and teacher assignments among their yearly decisions. They discussed discipline, athletics, monitoring and evaluating faculty, and staff and safety as daily concerns. Several discussed decision-making as being routine, in terms of listening, and in regard to time or lack of time. Some of the participants measured their daily decision-making processes by commenting, “I make hundreds a day” (Principal 4, January 30, 2012, Principal 7, February 10,
2012, Principal 11, February 16, 2012). Almost all of the principals described their decision-making as a reply to routine inquiries. Principal Two discussed answering “dozens of inquiries from your staff” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012).

Principal Four explained:

> It is the littliest, tiniest, minute details that take over your decision-making throughout the daily routine. The telephone calls, computer technicians, facilities people: what do we do about this? Where does this go? How can we handle this? What should I say to this person? The water is not running in the bathroom, Where do you want this to go? etc. And it is all of these many decisions that can chisel away at your day if you are not careful (Principal Four, February 4, 2012).

A number of the principals stated the significance of listening. As they elaborated, it was evident to the investigator that paying careful attention was a vital means they used in the information-gathering practice. Principal One and Three stressed listening. Principal Three was sympathetic when listening for that was an initial intuition she applied when faced with any choice. She said, “initially what I do is pay close attention to what is being discussed and not say a word. I listen clearly and show no reaction. I do not say anything throughout the entire time the other person is talking” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012).

Principal Nine also discussed listening at length and stated it is the first thing he does when making a decision. The remainder of his decision-making activity revolved around the application of policy. He referred to existing rules and procedures and gave a number of examples to illustrate the relationship of all decisions to policy (Principal Nine, February 14, 2012). Principal Seven talked about the way policy guided decisions, but added a discussion about the application of personality theory to his handling of people (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012).

All of the principals discussed the importance of time when making decisions. Several stated that in today’s world we have all become time conscious. Things need to get finished “in
a timely manner” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012). They maintained that quicker decisions can be made when confronted with a dilemma they had seen before. Examples of these include: various bus incidents, cutting in line, parents requesting certain teachers, and teachers making unreasonable requests. When a new issue arose, however, they favored thinking the situation through before making the decision (Principals 3, January 24, 2012; Principal 5, February 8, 2012; Principal 6, February 10, 2012; Principal 8, February 13, 2012; Principal 11, February 16, 2012). Several discussed the use of time to avoid decision-making. Principal One, Four and Twelve talked about their experiences in a school district where making no decision had been the approach of the former superintendent with the hope that the issue would go away.

In discussing her decision-making strategy, Principal Four admitted that sometimes “it is better not to do anything if you just don’t have a good decision to make” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012). She hastened to add that the strategy did not work for a very long time. Principal Twelve explained that sometimes procrastination is key because, “problems solve themselves and if you wait until the last minute then maybe you do not have to solve the problem” (Principal 12, February 17, 2012).

**What is the nature and description of the ethical dilemma?**

Moustakas writes, “the aim (of phenomenological research) is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (1994, p.13). This next question was designed to provide a complete, textured portrayal of the resolution of the ethical dilemma as the focus of study.

The principals were asked to describe ethical decision-making. Eight of the principals responded with a clear definition of ethical decision-making as doing what is right (Principal Two, January 19, 2012; Principal Three, January 24, 2012, Principal Four, January 30, 2012;
Principal Six, February 10, 2012; Principal Eight, February 13, 2012; Principal Ten, February 16, 2012; Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012; Principal Twelve, February 17, 2012). Principal One, though not articulating the definition, seemed to concur in his assertion that “conscience and your teaching, especially if you are brought up in the church, pretty much gives out a signal” (Principal One, January 16, 2012). Principal One is an ordained Pastor of a local church.

Principal Nine answered the question with a discussion of the “institutional lie” (Principal Nine, February 14, 2012) and his discomfort with that practice in trying to meet all the needs of his students for years. He spoke of institutional barriers from the school board and lack of funding.

Principal Seven said, “I would hope that all of my decisions are ethical” but never actually defining ethical decision-making. (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012). Principal Three commented that she asks every day, “Is this the right way? Is this the best way? Is this the honest way to do this activity?” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012). Principal Ten said, “It means doing what is right as opposed to doing something to better yourself” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012).

Others maintained that a standard will be used in every situation. Principal Four stated, “[in] ethical decision-making, you are using some standard to go by. In just pure decision-making, you maybe [are]. I guess you would still have some standards, but they could be different standards” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012). Principal Eleven maintained, “I think it all has to be ethical” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012). Principal Ten offered, “I don’t know how you can remove ethics from decision making” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012).
Ethical Decision-Making

The question of the principal’s use of ethical decision-making produced varied responses when ethics is used to make decisions. Most of the principals cited experience, education, upbringing, and values, beliefs, intuition, or “gut” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012). The principal who cited experience as a rule or standard to go by (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012) described experience as a teacher. To make ethical decisions, she looked back to what she learned when she was confronted with a similar decision at a time previous or to insights she gained over the years about people and systems (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012).

Principal One talked about his educational administration training (Principal One, January 16, 2012). He explained that “from the professional and the best, ‘I’ve been there, done that’ really helps me out” (Principal One, January 16, 2012). Many of the principals talked at length about policy manuals, handbooks, and rule books (Principal Four, January 30, 2012; Principal Six, February 10, 2012; Principal Eight, February 13, 2012; Principal Nine, February 14, 2012; Principal Ten, February 16, 2012; Eleven, February 16, 2012; Twelve, February 17, 2012). They described ethical decision making as following the established guidelines of the system and adhering to existing laws governing school administrative practice. While not necessarily equating ethical with legal, they certainly viewed illegal as unethical. They relied on policies that were established over time and established by consensus to govern their decision making behavior. Principal Ten evaluated whether “whatever happens is appropriate within the context and tradition of your school” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012).

All of the principals cited his or her own personal values as a rule to measure what was ethical. Several of the principals talked about heart and conscience. Principal Three said, “I
think the most important thing is to always follow your gut, your real inside” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012).

### Table 2

#### Scoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Justice</th>
<th>Critique</th>
<th>Care</th>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td><strong>6</strong></td>
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The First Hypothetical Scenario: After School

“Dana, a principal of a small school, had implemented several team building exercises with the help of Mr. Shirk, a long time teacher at the school. One Friday every month was a staff development day. After school, staff go to a happy hour at a local restaurant and bar. This has led to increased collaboration and the curriculum getting stronger. Mrs. Sampson, the most active parent at the school, showed Dana a picture on her Facebook page of a second grade teacher, Florence, drinking a shot of tequila. She was able to access Facebook because she was a “friend” of Mr. Shirk, who was at the restaurant. Florence was in the background of a picture of Mr. Shirk and his wife. Mrs. Sampson wants her son out of the teacher’s class because she views this as irresponsible behavior showing a lack of self control and an inability to handle a second grade classroom.”

Several principals spoke of being under stricter regulations than people working in other professions. A matrix was created based on the context of the comments; see Table 1 for some of this. See Table 2 for the ethical framework results. “I am assuming that they were at a
curriculum meeting when they were drinking at the bar. I do not think it is appropriate. We are under the lime light” (Principal One, January 16, 2012). “We always stress to first year teachers: watch what you post on your Facebook; what you download, what images are of you online” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012).

Principal Eight commented that it is true that, “our private lives are our own, yet we still have boundaries that we need to keep in mind. She said that this is because of the world wide web and the social network websites,” and went on to explain that because of the latest technology educators are under the “watchful eye of the world” including, as in this vignette, the parents who have access to this technology and hold us as educators of their children accountable (Principal Eight, February 13, 2012). After calling the teacher in, Principal One, remarked that, “I would then explain to the teacher that we have to be responsible. Our private lives are our own, but like a minister we have to be very cautious especially when you are a part of the community.” (Principal One, January 16, 2012)

Seven of the principals did not mention an ethical framework or any mention of ethics when discussing the resolution to this vignette. Paul Begley who is mostly associated with authentic leadership discusses administrative decisions as being made out of expediency and not for ethical reasons (see Begley, 2003; 2006). As noted through these findings not all principals responded with an ethical framework in mind when resolving the vignettes.

They simply stated what they would do. “I would call the parent in and explain that I have observed this teacher in the classroom and I do not believe that his/her out of school actions affect her teaching abilities,” (Principal Twelve, February 17, 2012). Five of the seven principals simply stated that they would not “cave in” to parental demands and not remove the student from the classroom. Principal Nine explains, that he, “would try to keep her [student] in that
teacher’s class because it has nothing to do with the instructional strategies” (Principal Nine, February 14, 2012).

Principal Three explains that discretion is key in the decision-making process:

“I would talk to the mother I do not think it shows irresponsibility in the classroom. It was irresponsible of the decision that the teacher made. We have to be aware of the decisions that were made. I would not take out the teacher out of the classroom or the student. I would have observed the teacher in the classroom prior to talking to the parent” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012).

Whereas Principal Five would call the parent and the teacher in at the same time explaining to the parent the rationale for her decision.

“I would have a long conversation with the teacher and the mother. I would explain to the mother that the teacher is both competent and intelligent and your child is not being removed from the classroom. There simply is no reason for it. I have had situations in which people have gotten divorced and that being made an issue for student removal” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012).

Four of the principals mentioned the ethic of the profession. “Our district guidelines prompt us to further discuss this situation with the teacher and I would have to call the teacher in and discuss this issue with him or her. I would want this person to explain this situation to me in his/her own words” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012). “I would sit with the teacher and share what the parent has shared with me and how we as educators of the next generation and as professionals are held accountable even to our internet postings” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012). One principal mentioned the ethic of justice in which he commented that what the teacher did was “not right and is a serious infraction” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012).
Second Hypothetical Scenario: Buddhism and Animals

“A central tenet to the practice of Buddhism is the caring and welfare of all creatures of the Earth. The belief discourages any human being from harming any living creature. Sophia, 8 years old, is a Buddhist student. Her teacher introduced the curriculum in the beginning of the school year by showing the students live bugs they would have to feed the class frog. Each student was to have a week of feeding the frog. Sophia was troubled and hurt by this and after three weeks of witnessing the students feed the live bugs to the frog she set the bugs and the frog free at recess. Sophia was sent to the principal’s office. The principal is concerned about respecting diversity in her school but usually such an offense could merit suspension.”

All of the principals stated that the teacher should never have let this incident go this far and provided an alternate means of communicating the lesson to the Buddhist student. They did mention as rural administrators that they know each and every student by virtue of the fact that the school population is so low and that they know or have known the community for such a long time. Therefore, most of the principals commented that not only would they have known this student, but this student’s extended family as well. Three principals when reading this scenario out loud even gave the student in this scenario an Asian name (Chang, Ming, Lee) while discussing this vignette, not realizing that she was already named “Sophia.” These principals referred to the student the entire time as “Chang,” etc. that they were discussing this incident. The researcher thinks this was done so as to show where this incident originated or to bring about a greater sense of empathy with the Buddhist student. This did not happen for any of the other vignettes. In the other vignettes they spoke of having experienced the same incident but not actually visualizing the student and scenario.

The ethic of care provided the principals’ resolution to this vignette. This was the only scenario in which the ethic of care was referred to the most, by four principals. The only other vignette in which the ethic of care is referred to is the last scenario on zero tolerance. Principals
One, Four, Six and Eleven used the language of the ethic of care. All spoke of the fact that the teacher and administrator should have known of the student’s Buddhist beliefs. Principal Four spoke from experience, adding a caring component:

“I should be aware, from the beginning of the school year, that the child is Buddhist and all teachers need to know their students, including this one. They need to know the child as a whole because that is the way to get to the heart of the child. We do have some children who have other faiths that do not believe in Halloween. We provide other activities for them to do. I would tell the teacher that she needs to provide other activities because we care about teaching this child science” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012).

Principal Eleven mentions that the ethic of care moves the educator beyond this scenario.

“It is as a classroom teacher and as a building leader, we need to be aware of those diversities maybe the classroom teacher did not know, but we as leaders should understand this and prevent this from happening by planning ahead for such instances and so this shows that we tolerate, understand and respect students’ diversities at all times, not just in this setting” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012).

Whenever the ethic of care was mentioned, it was mentioned out of a concern for a greater sense of tolerance and respect not only for this student but for a community of learners and for future students. All principals explained that, as administrators of rural schools, they are very well aware of the students and families coming in and out of the school, including migrant and transient households. Two principals used the ethic of justice as well, explaining it was their “duty” (Principal One, January 16, 2012) to know each child and their circumstances and that if anyone enters their building they will ask probing questions for that is the way to ensure building safety. “It is my duty to be concerned and to know all that goes on in this building and a lot of the time that means what goes on at home, too. I know these things because I think it creates a safer learning environment for all the other students” (Principal Six, February 10, 2012). These principals showed a genuine ethic of care and justice because they mentioned going that extra mile to help out those families and students in need, by volunteering in the community or actually ensuring that they are provided for through not only social services, but a community
network, so as the students can walk up to the school house gate fed, clothed and prepared to
learn.

Principals Two, Five, and Eight used the ethic of justice and were interested in issues of
equity when resolving the issues in this vignette. Principal Two explained that the student is a
minority and needs special consideration due to his/her religious beliefs. Principal Two spoke
about how as administrators:

“we see a lot more than we want to but it is the nature of the school day as it unfolds.
The entire school setting is visible to us. We see inequity throughout the school day. We
have to explain it to others who may not see it happening around them. I would talk to the
teacher, feeding the frog is not what is to be learned. I would ask her what can I teach the
child. No discipline or consequences here. This child needs to be understood not
punished” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012).

Principal Five, stated that the “students’ religious beliefs and how that affects what is
going on in the classroom is important yes, even though it is a curriculum activity…. the student
needs equitable treatment. I would speak out for him/her” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012). “I
like the last sentence, I find that humorous. With separation of church and state, you cannot
promote one religion over the other, we have to understand the struggle of this student and be
respectful of all religions, at all times” (Principal Eight, February 13, 2012). She is quoting the
law and therefore using the ethic of justice.

Principals Three and Twelve spoke in terms of the ethic of the profession. Principal
Three only saw the ethic of the profession and said that all administrators should do the same
when confronted with situations such as this one.

"We have a curriculum to teach here. We have PSSA’s [Pennsylvania State
Assessments] coming up right around the corner and the teacher is trying to educate those
students for those standards. The teacher would be upset that the bugs and frog are free.
We can do alternative activities for all reasons. We would be able to accommodate for
this student as district policy states. I would call the parent of the student and let them
know what we are planning to do” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012).
When discussing this vignette Principal Twelve understood the student was Buddhist and in the first sentences of this vignette stated that a central tenet of Buddhism was not to harm any living creature, but she seemed to have forgotten this important point as she explained her rationale.

“The student needs to understand that in our science curriculum we are asked to do things with animals. School policy says s/he has to learn this material for a reason and so the teacher should have provided another activity for the child to do. This does not merit suspension because of her religious beliefs. But the student should learn to work with animals because s/he will see other animals eat each other in the real world. We see squirrels squirting to eat nuts everywhere. If we are to educate children then we are to expose them to things that they may not be exposed to at home, like a Chemistry class is not a kitchen” (Principal 12, February 17, 2012).

Not one principal mentioned the ethic of justice but it is implied in the laws and concern for safety they cite when addressing this vignette. The principals seemed to understand the minority status of the student but only three explained it as playing a significant role in the education of the child. Two of the principals that evoked the ethic of critique also mentioned the importance of revising our curriculum needs to meet all students, including students in the rural context, that state and federal mandated testing requirements do not meet the students residing in rural communities but the focus is clearly suburban and urban students. One principal, emphasizing the rural context, even picked up a mandated test and read a question out loud, then commenting, “now tell me that [test] question is not biased towards a student who has been exposed to urban schooling” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012).

All of the principals empathized with this student and all resolved it in the same way: provide an alternative activity was stated over and over again. Meaning that they used the ethic of justice since providing an alternative lesson would be school policy. Yet all of the principals opted to go about explaining their rationale in different ways. Three of the principals did not
even mention an ethic, just what would be done if this were to occur in their school. Several of
the principals did acknowledge that “in this school, we lack diversity,” and spoke at length what
that means to the future of the students in their schools (Principal Two, January 19, 2012; Three,
January 24, 2012; Four, January 30, 2012; Six, February 10, 2012; Ten, February 16, 2012;
Eleven, February 16, 2012). These were also the oldest principals in this study.

Third Hypothetical Scenario: Deaf Education

Ms. Johnson, an American Sign Language (ASL) teacher, was assigned to sign the questions and answer choices on a mandated test verbatim as they are written in English. Three months later the test results arrived with the deaf students doing significantly better in Ms. Johnson’s class than in the other deaf education class. Ms. Johnson was called into the principal’s office where she explained that she did sign “conceptually accurate” ASL instead of “verbatim” English word order because she stated that signing correct ASL gives students a clearer picture of the questions and levels the playing field for deaf students. She finally stated to the principal, “I have a moral obligation to fight for the rights of deaf students so as to ensure that they are given the same opportunities as the other students.”

All of the principals solved this dilemma by using one of the three ethical frameworks of justice, critique, or the profession. The ethic of care was not utilized by any of the twelve principals in this study. The principals who discussed this vignette with the rationale of the ethic of justice also used the ethic of the profession when commenting at length as to due process. Only four principals mentioned the ethic of justice and profession as being tied together. Two of the principals realized that through the ethic of critique “doing what was equitable for all students” and that “would make it fair for the deaf students” (Principal One, January 16, 2012). Here these principals, spoke in terms of when the schools they worked in disproportionately benefited some groups and not others. They had to speak out or take further actions for these students.
The principals who spoke out about the ethic of the profession, and the four that explained this vignette through the ethic of profession and justice, explained the seriousness of the nature of this dilemma. They explained the difficulty that this situation represents at length and of the possible consequences that might follow. Principal Four went on for one full hour as to the severity of repercussions that are implicit in this dilemma. Principal Four who is the oldest and most experienced principal interviewed gravely explained:

“The teacher having a moral obligation has nothing to do with test taking. You can invalidate the results of the test. This teacher would merit a letter in her file, this issue is a lot bigger than she can ever begin to realize. And I as an administrator would have to report this to the state, at the same time the state sits on us [school district] so hard. The ramifications on not delivering testing [requirements] are huge. I would explain this to the teacher; information would go to the state, immediately in the form of a phone call, email and a fax. The state education department officials would decide what to do next. The school and district could face disciplinary action as well. The teacher needed to follow the specific instructions to sign verbatim not conceptually accurate” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012).

The ethic of justice was brought up with eleven of the principals. “Everybody has to do sometimes what we are not comfortable doing; that we may not agree with but we have a legal obligation to do so” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012). “Sometimes we have to do exactly what we are told and we do not like it. It is the fair thing to do” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012). Some principals generalized, mentioning today’s educational challenges when it comes to all students with disabilities, but when speaking of individuals the principals, stated that they dealt with these students justly and provided the necessary accommodations.

“The issue is not just with the deaf but for children with disabilities. We as learning community members, we provide accommodations for all students. She is the classroom teacher, she should have signed for all the other hearing impaired students. That is the right thing” (Principal Six, February 10, 2012).
Some principals stated that they understood the teacher’s actions but that what she did was clearly illegal (Principals One, Three, Four, Seven, Eight, Ten, Twelve). “The teacher was wrong, what she did was, simply put, illegal” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012).

“At the same time if she truly was doing it for concern for the students it is understandable. The issue here is that we are very constrained on how we deliver the mandated tests. So now we do not get to pick what we want to do. It is against the law, it creates an unfair playing field because students experienced two forms of the test” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012).

The principals understood that deaf students like all students with disabilities are giving accommodations. The teacher, however, should not have jeopardized her career as well as the school’s and the school district’s standing within the context of testing outcomes within the eyes of the state. As Principal Twelve explained, “the teacher clearly understood what she was doing was wrong. But she put the entire school district under greater scrutiny as a result of her actions” (Principal Twelve, February 17, 2012). All of the principals explained that the teacher should be reprimanded in some sort of way.

These responses may be the result of greater accountability being placed on schools and school districts in the light of NCLB and the testing atmosphere in schools today. As, Principal Four emphatically stated, “look at today’s high stakes testing world; I have to prepare all of my students for rigorous testing. That should be done in a reliable way to ensure test validity for all of my students” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012). “We must outperform the others [schools] or else a report card is mailed out to all parents in this district. The teachers understand that in today’s testing environment testing infractions are taken very seriously” (Principal Eight, February 13, 2012).
Fourth Hypothetical Scenario: Zero Tolerance

“The school has a zero tolerance policy on bringing weapons to school. Andrew, a sixth grade student who volunteers at the after-school math tutoring program, approached the principal in the hallway and said, “You have to suspend me from school.” Andrew proceeded to explain that he has a knife in his backpack because he was at Boy Scouts late last night and forgot to remove it from his backpack when he came to school that morning.”

As soon as this was read the initial reaction of all the principals was, “I had a situation like this.” This scenario touched a nerve from all of the principals and it is something that they were all too familiar with due to their rural environment. All of the principals had experienced a similar situation and recounted their experiences. Every single one of the principals except one specifically stated that the student should go unpunished. They explained that they have come across similar situations and were totally understanding and responsive as to the outcomes of this scenario. Once again, recognizing the rural setting in which, working hard, guns, knives, and animal husbandry are a routine part of a child’s daily life. “I have children who know more about the birthing process [in animals] by age eight than a gynecologist fresh out of medical school and yes they have to use sharp instruments to do this” (Principal Nine, February 14, 2012).

Not one of the principals followed the ethic of the Profession, even though it was mentioned often, it was not the resolution to this dilemma. They explained that the cases presented to them as administrators with situations similar to this one should be taken on an individual basis. Also, one principal went as far as to say, “had this been my son, I would have taught him to approach a figure of authority and explain the mishap to them. I would have my son call his grandpap immediately so as to come to the school and remove the weapon.” The principal continued:
“and that is how I handled it when it was the first day of hunting season, I had a student who is known as an avid hunter since the age of eight who had a knife in his backpack, I kept it for him until a relative, I think it was his father, came to school to pick it up and I explained to the Dad that this is not allowed in schools anymore, not like the days when we went to school” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012).

The principal and the father went to the same school from Kindergarten on. He knew the father of the student as if he was “his brother” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012). Therefore, the question that arose over and over again was the fact that these schools are in small rural communities in which everyone knows your name and every little detail about your life. The principals asked, “how can I punish this student, if he did not do it intentionally” and “he was honest enough to approach me” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012; Principal Eight, February 13, 2012; Principal Nine, February 14, 2012)?

All of the principals used the ethic of justice when discussing this situation and nine of the principals also used the ethic of the profession to explain their actions. But only one opted to suspend the student, Principal Seven. Whereas Principal Two explains this as a teachable moment.

“A little girl said I got this [knife] from my Dad’s dresser, but the student was very honest. And she came up to me and told me the truth. I would use this student as a model. This is a learning opportunity. To teach both tolerance and bringing weapons is wrong; if you know that you brought something to school, let me know. Say you work on the farm or you had scouts the day before you have to report it immediately to a teacher, that is the lesson not to be punished and have my students live in fear. In this dilemma, where the student didn’t have it out, I would just call the parent” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012).

Several of the principals acknowledged this as learning opportunity for the entire school. Nine of the principals stated that this child was honest and should be commended for his honesty, that it was right for him to come up to an adult. Ten of the principals mentioned that the zero tolerance policy must be changed to reflect the nature of each individual case. “This policy
needs to be worded differently” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012). All of the principals admitted that they would let the superintendent know immediately. “It is the nature of the game that we play; he has to know right away and I tell him who the kid was and what he did” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012).

Principal Seven was the youngest principal with fewest years of experience. He was the only one who would have taken punitive action(s). “The principal has to suspend the sixth grade student. It is part of district policy” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012). He went further to explain that the suspension should be for a full year. “The Federal Guns and School Act states expulsion for one year” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012). The other principals when they quoted this act, added, “but the chief school administrator has the authority to override that” (Principal Two, Three, Five, Six, Eight, Nine, Eleven, Twelve). “The point is that the school has a zero tolerance policy, everybody does. You can’t make exceptions for that” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012).

He went on to explain that it is his job to teach the consequences of actions to the students and parents.

“Parent[s] would have trouble with this. You explain to the parents that yes people make mistakes and there are consequences. You have to get parents to understand that a zero tolerance policy is a zero tolerance policy. What if another kid found that knife and used your child’s knife to commit a crime? What if your child was blamed for something that he did not do? This would help the parents” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012).

The other principals were very well aware of the zero tolerance policy, wanted it changed and explained that they would do the right thing by informing the superintendent immediately. They all sent a clear message to the student and parents/guardians involved but did not have the student suspended.
“Today, the students usually understand what is going on and know the consequences. We tell them every new school year and again at Halloween, no real, look alike or fake weapons. I would call the superintendent first and inform him of the infraction. He has the discretion as to what to do. I would suggest that the boy call home and have a relative pick up the knife and explain to the parent and student that this is not allowed” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012)

Principal Eleven added, “especially if it is a child that I know personally. I mean a child that I really know, I know their family, I have been in this community all of my life, it would be rare if I do not know you” (Principal Eleven, February 16, 2012). Another principal stated that it would serve nobody’s purpose to suspend a student for one year for being honest. “This is just another example that this zero tolerance policy needs to be eliminated, cases like this need to be brought to light” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012). Most principals acknowledged that the student did make a mistake, but was honest and, therefore, did not warrant punitive action.

This scenario explained the importance of the rural context when making ethical decisions. “Had I been a principal of an urban district, the situation would be different and so would have the outcome,” Principal Two, January 19, 2012, explained. She said that even though we are spaced out, our proximity lies in the fact that the school community and the rural community remains in close contact.

“This is the place where you need something done, it will, I have a neighbor that can do that for you. Driveway shoveled, tire changed, what service do you need done? We take care of it because we see it even before you ask for the service. “Looks like that tire is flat and you need to get to work tomorrow, let me give you a hand with that,” anyone would say to you here. We are close at heart but our driving distances and those hills keep us apart” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012).

Summary

Looking at the data collectively, Table 2, it is clear that the ethic of the profession prevailed when elementary school principals in rural Pennsylvania had to make decisions. Some principals when reflecting upon the vignettes used no ethical framework when resolving the
dilemmas. This was especially evident in Vignette One and Two. In Vignette One only five of the twelve principals used an ethical framework when discussing drinking and Facebook. Four of the principals referred to the ethic of the profession and only one mentioned the ethic of justice. Only nine principals used an ethical framework in analyzing Vignette Two. Four used the ethic of care, three used the ethic of critique and two referred to the ethic of the profession when discussing Sophie the Buddhist student who freed the animals at recess. When analyzing Vignette Three the principals were overwhelmingly justice orientated. As a matter of fact eleven of the principals used language distinctly associated with the ethic of justice, “just,” “fair,” and “right.” Eight principals referred to Vignette Three in terms of the ethic of the profession. And only two principals referred to social inequity and used the ethic of critique.

Not one principal used the ethic of care in elaborating on the rights of the deaf students and mandated assessments. This could be due to a weakness in the instrumentation. In the last Vignette, the principals were overwhelmingly in the framework of the ethic of justice and some overlapped with the ethic of profession. Nine used the ethic of the profession to justify their actions with the zero tolerance policy and only two used the ethic of care. Not one principal utilized the ethic of critique when elaborating on the student who honestly turned himself in because he was carrying a knife. They stated that the law was wrong and each incident needs to be handled differently. Some principals went as far as declaring the law as being wrong yet never defying it in the true meaning of the ethic of critique.

All of the principals were white (See Appendix D). There were six females and six males that were elementary school principals represented from rural Pennsylvania. Only one principal, Number Five, had taken one ethics course in a doctoral program, not at Pennsylvania State University. She asked to keep a copy of the vignettes so as to train her teachers using
them. Principal One was an ordained Pastor but explained he had taken no ethics courses. All of
the eleven remaining principals had no official ethics training.

Begley (2006) explains the requisites for authentic leadership as being self-knowledge, a
capacity for moral reasoning, and sensitivity to the orientation of others. It was clear that some
principals were authentic leaders. They were torn between their need to be authentic and honest
and their need to express all that was good about a staff member or a student, whom they did not
know in the vignettes, yet identified with their characteristics. These principals all had more
than five years of administrative experience and brought up concrete examples from their past
experiences to corroborate their rationale for decision-making. Several discussed decision-
making in terms of being routine, actively listening and regarding time or lack of time. Several
principals spoke of guilt and in the end eventually having to face the community when making a
decision. “Have I made bad decisions? Yes, I have and I learned from them. Fortunately they
were not big ones,” (Principal Ten, February 16, 2012).

This is a reflection that many of these participants had. This is the perspective of the
ethic of care in which individuals dwell upon the consequences of their decisions and actions.
Generating questions such as: “Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my
actions? What are the long term effects of a decision I make today? If I am helped by someone
now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual or to society in general?”
(Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 18) The notion is that this paradigm also asks individuals to
grapple, as these administrators did with moral imperatives.

In sum, most of the principals always came back to reflect upon their decisions
incorporating factors such as accountability towards the students. These principals questioned
the decision they made today is truly in the best interests of the student, rather than serving
another purpose. They determined that sometimes acting in the best interest of all students means standing out from the crowd of educators. These leaders respect their teachers and staff yet have a responsibility to ensure a quality education for all students under their supervision. These principals when making critical decisions clearly followed the best interests model (Stefkovich, 2007) in which they used “self-reflection, open-mindedness and an understanding that making ethically sound decisions profoundly influences others’ lives” (21). When discussing their resolutions the principals used self-reflection in their deliberation and consistently referred back to their own experiences in “situations just like this one” (Principals Three, Five, Six, Eight, Eleven and Twelve). They respected all of the parties involved but consistently referred back to their responsibility as an administrator within a rural community is to educate as well as be an “advocate for the children” (Principal Eight February 13, 2012 and Principal Twelve, February 17, 2012). They also reiterated in several instances their concern for the “safety”, “security” and “protection” (Principals Three, Four, Six and Eight) of all students involved as being a priority. When making ethical decisions these principals understood that ensuring a quality education for all students in their rural communities was the primary purpose of their job description. They made use of “teachable moments” and often used words like respect and responsibility, key elements of the Best Interests Model (Stefkovich, 2007).

The rural elementary school principal plays many different roles while on the job. In a smaller school district, roles and responsibilities are not clearly delineated. Formal leadership training does not adequately prepare rural principals for the host of duties they may encounter including complex ethical dilemmas that they come face to face every day.

The participants identified their sources for ethical standards. They discussed the accepted standards of the educational profession, and cited personal experience. Several of the
administrators also described role models that had influenced them. All of the respondents maintained that personal beliefs affected administrative decision making. As a group, they agreed that one’s personal beliefs defined who s/he was. One’s action, then, could not be separated from the convictions, beliefs, and attitudes that were woven into their human fiber.

Several questions were included on the interview to explore the influence of demographic variables on the practice of decision making by elementary principals. Eight of the twelve maintained that experience influenced the development of their decision making skills. Experience was credited with making better, more thoughtful decisions. Several principals shared their feelings that experience had made decision making easier.

The principals were divided on the question of whether education influenced their ability to make decisions and, more specifically, ethical decisions. The principal that had earned a doctorate reported that her respective educational preparation had been influential in shaping her ethics and developing her decision making skills. One shared that his education had encouraged him to read, be curious, and investigate. Another said that it helped build her confidence and that she had credibility in her position. Most seemed to believe their education expanded their knowledge base. Leadership classes helped them deal with people. Two of the three youngest administrators did not think that their formal education influenced their administrative actions.

Other factors were discussed relative to decision making. The location of the school was not recognized as a factor influencing ethical decision making. Rather, the principals asserted that location determined the types of decisions that confronted the administrator and the solutions that were feasible in a given situation. The community values and mores were thought to be more often a factor in decision making.
Most of the principals experienced at least occasional pressure from others when making decisions. When asked about justifications for decisions, some differences were noted. When asked if a justification should be necessary, the group was again divided. Some principals thought they should. Others thought they should not have to give justifications for their decisions based on their position, experience, and credentials. A third group thought that certain decisions, such as those affecting people, demanded a justification.

The principals identified factors, institutions and people that shaped their ethical thinking and most of them thought ethics could be learned. While only one had taken a formal college course, most offered that it would be helpful. The group favored the use of case studies and scenarios to teach ethical decision making and kept the vignette sheet to train future teacher-leaders.

The researcher imposed delimitations on the study. First, the demographics of the school sites were rural and isolated. Socioeconomically, none were wealthy the school sites all had greater than 50% of their student population on free and reduced lunch programs and served needy populations. Second, the gender balance within this study which is evenly balanced does not correspond to the gender profile within the education administration profession in the United States. Finally, the small size of student enrollment and diversity (95% or more are white) was vastly similar in all the sites visited.

PART II

While the investigator evaluated and coded the data, an additional topic arose in which these principals cited defining moments in their lives that set the tone in resolving the vignettes. Three participants, all female, brought up life experiences involving injustice and related to the frame of critique when describing their resolutions to the vignettes. Five of the principals
referred to a key moving experience they had so as to use the ethic of justice and “prepare the students for real world consequences.” (Principal Three, January 19, 2012). Some discussed “removing the umbilical cord” so as to understand the responsibility of being a student and move on to high school and eventually succeed in this “big, wide world of ours” (Principal Six, February 10, 2012; Principal Eight, February 13, 2012). “It is not that I do not care about these kids, it is that I am not their mother, I am not going to baby them, I am going to tell it to them like it is” (Principal One, January 16, 2012). Over and over, the principals referred to these frames to justify the choices they made in resolving the vignettes.

The principals all favored the ethical frames of justice and the profession to solve difficult decisions. This theme became evident as the researcher coded the principals’ responses to the vignette questions. The ethical frames of justice, critique, care, and profession emerged, but not for every resolution. From the justice perspective all of the principals spoke at length about treating all students equally, students understanding there are consequences to their actions, and that schools are a training ground for the real world. They included in their explanations doing what is right, good for the community, and enforcing the law.

From the ethic of critique, some of the participants expressed a deep concern for a lack of diversity not only when it comes to race, the largest non-white population in the schools was 5%, but in being exposed to various disabilities, as in the deaf student vignette. This was a concern most explained because it did not expose students to the reality of our changing world. “Our students are not exposed to different concepts or other ways of doing things” (Principal Seven, February 10, 2012).

From the ethic of care, several of the participants discussed the significance of teamwork, putting students’ interests first, caring about the future of the community, and helping others.
They explained the absolute disregard some educators have for the needs of students and that in their schools that would not be tolerated. That in creating a school community, the needs of all students should not only be met but maintained due to a concern not for the student but for humanity as a whole. Principal Four explained this eloquently.

“If we are going to educate these kids, they are going home and educating their parents and grandparents on simple things like hygiene. We have signs in public bathrooms that remind employees to wash their hands that are millions of people forgetting to wash their hands and preventing disease. If we teach the kids they will teach the community. We are creating a caring community of educators” (Principal Four, January 2012).

When it came to the ethic of justice, most principals spoke in this frame. They have a professional policy and they need to adhere to this. They quoted district and federal guidelines and curriculum limitations. They visualized this in terms of “running things like this by the superintendent” (Principal Three, January 24, 2012; Principal Five, January 8, 2012; Eight, February 13, 2012). When it comes to making major decisions, all of the principals mentioned that they would contact the superintendent at some point in time. Here is the ethic of the profession put into practice. “Should an incident like this arise in my school, I would pick up the phone and let the superintendent know all of the details, not to get guidance, but it is the professional thing to do, to let him know what I am up to” (Principal Four, January 30, 2012). All of the principals explained that they as school leaders take on a lot more responsibility than the job entails, but they have to so as to be present for the students. “It is not a part of my job description, but I think that schools have to take on a larger role in society,” (Principal Eight, February 13, 2012). All explained that the rural context has a lot to do with their role as principal being overextended.
Chapter V
CONCLUSIONS

Following another look at the problem, the chapter provides a review of the methodology used to explore the research questions. In the next section, this chapter outlines a summary of the findings and a discussion of the results. Then, the chapter shares the theoretical implications of the results and identifies unexpected outcomes. The Multiple Ethical Paradigm theory is analyzed relative to the results of this study based on the research questions guiding the study. Finally, this chapter outlines recommendations for future research and practice as it relates to rural educational leadership.

This study contributes to the research on ethical decision making and of ethical decision making practices on elementary school principals within the rural context. It provides an in-depth look at a group of educational leaders usually overlooked by researchers.

This study explored the rural context through twelve principals’ resolutions to four vignettes in the use of decision making processes. But it was not a comparative study. Therefore, there should be a reason to believe that say, urban principals could have the same resolutions to these vignettes. Specifically, this study sought to explore the principals’ perceptions on the rural context’s effect on: how their decision making affects leadership and their decisions in difficult ethical situations. As Schmuck (1993) has stated, “Gender is inclusive, one cannot study females in our society without studying males” (p 5). Consequently, six male and six female principals were selected for study.

At the core of understanding leadership and leadership styles is ethical decision making. Moral issues, what constitutes just or fair treatment of one another and what rights we each have concern a leader’s duties and obligations to stakeholders (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). Each
administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life; that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas (Foster, 1986). Shapiro and Stefkovich explain, “Dilemmas in educational institutions can be complicated and may naturally lead to the use of two or more paradigms to solve problems” (p. 7). Understanding how a person leads necessitates an understanding of how he or she solves difficult ethical dilemmas, often associated with paradoxes within educational administration.

The main topic of this study is how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions in their work? Furthermore, this research addresses the following inquiries:

7. Do ethical factors emerge when administrators from rural elementary schools provide answers to vignettes of real life dilemmas?

8. Were the decisions principals from rural elementary schools made regarding the ethical dilemma vignettes governed by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, how?

9. Which ethical framework, justice, critique, care or the profession, if any, do these principals from rural elementary schools use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas in the vignettes?

10. Do rural elementary school principals perceive the rural context as affecting their ability to make difficult ethical decisions? If so, how?

The findings from this qualitative study of twelve schools and the perceptions of their leaders cannot be generalized to other schools; however, the results can add to the existing knowledge base on rural educational leadership. Furthermore, the answers to this study’s research questions can provide insight for other researchers as to areas needing further investigation. The answers to this study’s guiding questions depict one researcher’s assessment
of leadership that occurred in twelve specific rural settings. This study sheds some light on twelve rural principals’ perceptions on leading in the rural context and how their resolutions to dilemmas and decision making impacts leadership.

As stated in Chapter 3, this study is a case study that involves twelve rural elementary school principals in central Pennsylvania. The study utilized a qualitative methodology to explore the research questions guiding this study. The twelve schools endured elements of geographic isolation. The schools are in counties with high poverty and unemployment rates as identified by the Center for Rural PA (CRPA, 2010). The school populations have over 50% low income students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch. All of these administrators have been in their present position of high school principal for at least one full year and had more than five years administrative experience.

Chapter 3 provided an in depth explanation of the methodology used to explore the research questions guiding this study. Chapter 4 provided an overview of the decision making that these principals had to resolve in the rural school context. All of the schools selected for study are located in rural counties in central Pennsylvania.

Every attempt was made to explore each of the research questions through interviews with the leaders and observation. The tools used for collecting data included the following: demographic questionnaire analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The researcher selected principals for study through records from the Pennsylvania School Study Council and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Schools were selected based on their rural status as determined by the requirements outlined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Beyond those initial criteria, the schools all experience some elements of geographic isolation because of their location. After the identification of potential schools, the
researcher contacted the principals of those respective schools through email, letter writing and cold phone calls. If the principal was willing to participate in the study, the researcher sent out written notification of the interview time and permission to conduct research. In each case, permission was granted in writing.

The interviews ranged in time from one and a half to two and a half hours. The interviews utilized a semi-structured format with a series of open ended questions mapped to the research questions guiding the study. The researcher recorded and transcribed each of the interviews with the permission of the subjects. While conducting the interviews, the researcher also made observations about the rural context of the schools where the interviews occurred.

**Summary**

The semi-structured interviews focused specifically on the main focus question and the areas of inquiry guiding this study. This study focused specifically on the practice of ethical decision making by elementary school principals. Since the study was exploratory and descriptive, qualitative methods were used. The qualitative study addressed the attitudes, values and processes which influenced the ethical decision making of principals. The investigator relied on a semi-structured, in-depth interview as the primary method of data collection. A pilot study was conducted to determine if questions were useable, understandable, and able to generate meaningful responses. Based on the pilot interview results, revisions were made.

A pool of rural elementary school principals was identified through the Pennsylvania School Study Council and the Pennsylvania Department of Education of public elementary schools. Thirty-two participants were selected to include both males and females with more than one year of experience. Twelve participants responded, six female and six male, principals each with over five years of experience.
The researcher spent some time at the beginning of the first part of the interview to explain the purpose of the study and to gain written consent from the respondents. This time was also used to make small talk about education in general and to develop a level of comfort and rapport with the principal. During this time it became evident to the researcher that each of the respondents really enjoyed his or her work as an educational leader. Although each principal would later talk at length about the challenges of educational leadership, they all were proud of their schools and their students. They also expressed a high level of commitment to the communities they serve.

As the interviews proceeded, the researcher continued to code the data. The research questions guiding the study and the two theoretical frames provided the initial basis for coding categories. As this work was completed, different themes began to emerge from the data. As the principals talked about their personal experiences, it was evident that the principals all had close ties to the community and the schools that they lead in, as eight of the twelve had attended school in the districts they now lead, the others are from neighboring rural school districts. All of the respondents initially left home to attend college or to seek employment only to later return to the community. The principals all valued the way of life they had come to know during their childhood and returned home to explore employment in the schools where they graduated from years earlier. These ties to the school and the community impact the principals’ abilities to lead and make difficult decisions. All of the principals spoke about the importance of “fit” and spoke about feeling comfortable in their current role as principal.

The principals’ ties to their communities and their schools influenced many decisions they made throughout the course of this study. Their background provided valuable insights to the community and an understanding of the context surrounding them. Being from the
communities they served afforded the educational leaders an understanding of the priorities and the values of those residing within the district. It enabled them to anticipate consequences of pending decisions more easily than if they were outsiders. Through the principals’ answers about their level of education and years of experience this study uncovered that the principals all perceived the rural context as having some level of influence on their obtaining positions and other prospects.

The female candidates took a traditional path to the principalship through teaching positions. In their case, they were committed to the school district where they taught and waited for administrative opportunities in those districts. The male principals tried other careers first and switched to education, so they could move home. All of the principals felt that opportunities for advancement were available; however, those opportunities would require a long commute or relocation.

Another theme that came out of the semi-structured interview responses was the effect that a leader’s gender has in the rural context. The female respondents had experienced gender discrimination, and the male respondents both spoke about the stereotype of the male school principal. Furthermore, the male respondents both acknowledged that being a male was an important factor for obtaining the school principalship in their districts.

The principals’ perceptions and agreement of the difficulties present within the rural context are notable. Their perceptions affirmed what the research base suggests regarding the rural context. The principals all expressed frustration with having a limited tax-base. They all spoke to the difficulties of working within a climate that lacks diversity. The principals spoke about how they all take on many different roles that would normally be delegated in larger districts. Finally, they all expressed frustration with attracting and retaining qualified teachers.
Demographic information was collected from the chosen group. Six principals were below the age of 50 and six were above the age of 50. The administrators served in various rural locations throughout Central Pennsylvania. One principal had earned a doctorate degree and this was the only principal to have any formal ethical training in the form of one university level course in ethics. All of the principals had earned a Master’s degree and were certified by the PA Department of Education in administration. Experience varied with only four serving fewer than ten years, three serving 11-15 years, and five principals serving more than twenty years.

The principals reported that they made numerous decisions every day. Some decisions were part of the daily routine and included ones concerning teachers, students, parents, and superiors. Some were periodic such as those concerned with budget planning, teacher evaluation and placement, and strategic planning. Most of the administrators reported that the decisions that had an impact on people were the hardest to make, as in all of the vignettes.

Seven of the twelve principals defined ethical decision making as doing what was right. Another principal, while not using those words, described ethical decision making as a conscience-directed activity. The investigator found no difference in the articulated understanding of ethical decision making by male and female principals. Further, there was no difference noted between principals based on age. As the discussions about ethical decision making unfolded, all of the principals discussed ethical decision making as an imperative.

As a group, these principals were all concerned about ethics and ethical behavior. When asked what rules they relied on to determine the ethical course of action, most of the principals cited their respective experience, education, upbringing, values and beliefs. Further, they maintained that the standards do not change with the circumstances or context. Rather, they suggested, the application of those standards varied according to the context.
All of the principals admitted they had observed unethical practices. Most of them talked in terms of several observations involving superiors, board members, community supporters, parents, teachers and students. The unethical practices included incidents of immoral behavior such as stealing, lying and treating some people differently than others.

The principals did not talk about their own unethical behavior, though at least some were appeared to conduct unethical practices. For example, Principal Five (February 8, 2012) shared that she did not allow parents with accents to speak as guest speakers at her school although parents with Pennsylvania accents were allowed. In addition, the principals reported that they all face ethical dilemmas. Interestingly, most of the principals believed that their initial or instinctive reactions about decisions were also the right and ethical ones.

Discussion of the Results

This section of the study explores the theoretical implications along with the unexpected outcomes. Next, the answers to the research questions are provided, and their relationship to the theoretical lenses is shared. Finally, this section provides recommendations for preparation program improvements, policy, practice, and areas of further inquiry.

Qualitative research alone cannot provide sufficient evidence to make broad generalizations for all rural schools; however, the results of this study provide a look at twelve rural elementary school leaders and their leadership within the rural context at twelve settings at one time. This study suggests that the rural context, from the perspective of the principals, impacts their ability to lead, and make difficult ethical decisions.

Further, the decision making of school principals could not be separated from their moral convictions, values, and beliefs (Beck, 1994; Goens, 1996; Kohlberg, 1981; Mann, 1975; Sergiovanni, 1994, 1992, 1991; Starrat, 1991; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). This study also
affirmed this theory. The principals applied their own personal beliefs and ethical standards to
decisions and the principals themselves said they did. They spoke of how their personal beliefs
would constantly influence their behavior, not that it should. This finding was consistent with
the literature.

Furthermore, the principals expressed a need to include all stakeholders, staff, guardians,
and students, whenever possible. Listening was articulated by several of the participants as an
important first step to decision making and could be interpreted as something that corresponds
with problem identification. The principals stressed experience and found decisions they had
confronted before to be the easiest to make, thus possibly reaffirming the work of Staratt (2004)
and Aristotle before him that habits of virtue can be learned.

An ethical component was not present in the decision making of each of the participants.
They resolved vignettes one and two clearly and distinctly from any ethical framework. The
researcher did not provoke them to use an ethical framework at any point in time. The researcher
tried to remain neutral at all times. This confirms Begley’s assertion that administrators do not
always see their decisions as ethical ones (Begley, 2001). Most of the participants used an
ethical framework. This finding was expected based on what has already been established about
administrative decision making (Foster, 1986). Calabrese (1988) and Dogett (1988) concluded
that principals were confronted by ethical issues on a daily basis. Managing daily issues requires
principals to uphold principles of honesty and integrity. Many have studied the topic of ethics
among educational administrators, especially in the areas of meta-ethics and normative ethics
(Beck, 1994; Beck & Murphy, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1994, 1992, 1991; Starratt, 1994; Strike,
Haller, & Soltis, 2005; Walker, 1993). They concluded that ethics are a concern for those who
practice educational administration.
Some existing research addresses the influence of demographic variables on the decision making of educational administrators. This study also explored demographic influence and found that age, professional experience and education seemed to affect the decision making process. The older, more experienced participants thought through the decision, deliberated, out loud, several ethical frameworks, evoked past experiences and came up with complex solutions. The less experienced, younger participants simply answered the questions to the resolutions.

Fenstermaker (1996) studied superintendents and found a confusion about ethical standards or specifically, a disturbing disregard of them. He also found that more ethical decisions were made by superintendents in large school systems with higher salaries and fewer years of experience. This study of elementary school principals did not find confusion about ethical standards or more ethical behavior among those with less experience. The researcher did not find differences among these principals in their concern for ethical behavior or the need for adherence to standards, policies, and laws. The principals with less experience did appear to approach ethical decision making differently than those administrators who had been serving schools for a longer period of time. Most of them admitted, however, that they approached ethical decision making in a different way now than they did in their early administrative experiences. They have learned to consult their peers, listen and be patient.

The review of the literature produced no studies that addressed difference between men and women in their ethical standards or application of those standards to the decision making process. Further, no studies suggested that the location (urban, suburban, rural) of the school influenced ethical decisions. This study explored those demographic characteristics but found no evidence that men and women approach ethical decision making differently. In addition, the principals said that the location of the school did not change their ethical standards. While
several administrators suggested the location influenced the application of their ethics, their ethical standards did not change based on where they were. This finding was based on an analysis of responses to the interview questions which explored the decision making processes as well as the opinions of the individual principals on the demographic characteristics themselves.

**Implications and Outcomes**

In regard to the existing research on the Multiple Ethical Paradigm theory, the research base on rural school leaders, and the rural context, this study found many consistent elements when compared to existing research. On the other hand, other outcomes of this study provide challenges to existing research or the lack of existing research depending upon one’s perspective.

The following section of this chapter explores the answers to the research questions and describes the outcomes that reflected the existing research. The next paragraphs of this section will describe the challenges to the research as well as one unexpected outcome uncovered.

The first challenge to existing literature refers to gender. Research has extensively shown that gender can be a barrier to women seeking administrative positions; however, recent studies suggest that women have made dramatic improvements throughout the past decade. Holtkamp (2002) states that the number of women in administrative roles has increased, but it is far from being proportionate to the numbers of women in education. These stated improvements seem to lag behind in the rural context. In this study all of the principals felt that gender is a barrier for females in their respective school districts. The six female principals provided examples of gender discrimination, and the six male principals spoke about the existence of gender bias, “we have no female principals in our school district” (Principal Six, February 10, 2012).

A second challenge to existing literature is the lack of existing literature itself. This study provides examples and perceptions from the participants that suggest the rural context does
impact their decision making. Beyond that, this study provides examples that illustrate how their daily responsibilities were different than those of many suburban and urban leaders. “From the moment my students are greeted getting off the bus, I am looking at their eyes, hands and feet. Do they look hungry? Are their hands purple from the cold? Do they have mittens on? Or shoes with holes” (Principal Two, January 19, 2012). Almost all of the principals emphatically spoke about having more challenges in preparing students in the rural sector.

As the researcher coded and explored the data, one unexpected outcome surfaced. The principals all spoke about the importance of following rules and policy when making difficult decisions, but they all provided examples or answers that contradicted their earlier statements. In coding the principals’ responses across the four ethical paradigms, it became clear to the researcher that most of the principals’ answers and the examples they provided consistently contradicted their earlier stated focus on rules and procedures. Whatever the reason, the principals all felt the need to speak to the importance of following rules; however, their explanations of their own decision making processes and the examples they provided to frame their decision making did not reflect that stated adherence to rules.

During the final member check procedure, in which an email was sent out to all of the participants informing them of the results of the findings of this study. The researcher asked the principals about this inconsistency in the data. Their answers reflected the use of rules as an initial undertaking in decision making. Most explained that from that point, the individuals involved and the circumstances surrounding decisions became more influential than what the rule suggested as a course of action. The researcher informed them of the results, that many used the ethics of the profession and justice in framing their resolutions. All of the principals commented on this finding. Several spoke to the fact that they are caring – they care about the
well being not only of the student, but of the community and therefore that is the reason for following protocol. Others stated that as professionals we are trained to set aside our personal feelings and make decisions based on what is right. And yet others stated that the reason the researcher did not find rural principals to be caring was because they have to be answerable to the school board or supervisors when making a decision and in today’s world, “word travels fast, I have to treat all students equally, if I suspend Jake for his inappropriate actions, then I have to suspend Clint for that same action” (Principal Eleven, February 24, 2012).

**Answers to Research Questions**

One overarching question and four supporting questions guided this study. In this section each of those supporting questions will be answered, followed by the answer to the overarching question: how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions in their work?

**Ethical Factors**

The first supporting question was, “Do ethical factors emerge when administrators provide answers to vignettes of real life dilemmas in schools?” Not all of the time. When answering two of the vignettes, one and two, the findings produced at least two principals in which there was no ethical framework mentioned. In vignettes three and four, several of the principals were interwoven between the ethical frameworks. Most of the principals spoke of the ethics of justice and the profession simultaneously. The ethic of critique was used the least in answering and justifying the resolution to the dilemmas presented to the principals.

In trying to understand ethical factors driving decision making practices, Principal Seven also explained that he perceives that caring for the district and caring for the students should be synonymous. His answer explained that he perceives consistency to be a good thing. He also
explained that, in resolving vignette three about deaf students and testing, caring is probably not synonymous because of the nature of high stakes testing.

An important ethical factor is working towards the best interests of the students. All of the principals spoke about focusing on the kids and giving what they needed in order to succeed. Most, further explained, that the needs of the students comes as a given and is a priority and much more important in the rural setting.

This would be in congruence with Stefkovich’s best interest of the student principle in which she states, “how easy it is to ignore the voices of those who literally have the most to lose, it is incumbent on school leaders to make ethical decisions that truly reflect the needs of students” (Stefkovich, 2006, p.21). Stefkovich further explains that “the student’s best interests are at the center of the ethic of the profession” (2006, p.21). This principle is totally aligned with the findings of this study. Most of the principals used the ethic of the profession when resolving the ethical dilemmas.

**Ethical Standards**

The next question was: “Were the decisions principals made regarding the ethical dilemma vignettes governed by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, how?” The principals identified factors, institutions, and people that had shaped their ethical thinking. They included parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, pastors among those who were most important. Only one, included her educational training. Most of them thought ethics could be learned. The research indicated that many believe the absence of training in ethical decision making was a disadvantage for school administrators (Beck, 1996; Fenstermaker, 1996; Nash, 2002; Reeves & Jones, 1999). The findings of this study suggest, however, that training must begin very early. These principals attributed their most basic standards to their values and
beliefs instilled by their parents. Further, they appeared to make a distinction between an ethical standard and ethical behavior. That having a standard does not necessarily lead to ethical behavior.

While only one took a formal college course, most stated and believed that it would be helpful. Also, most of the principals suggested the use of case studies and scenarios to teach ethical decision making. The scenario approach was well established in the literature in such works by Shaprio & Stefkovcih, (2011) and Strike, Haller, & Soltis, (2005). Nash (2002) and Kirby, Paradise, & Protti (1992) also emphasized the use of models to analyze the decisions of principals. However, the principals who participated in this study clearly favored vignettes and case studies as opposed to theoretical concepts. This proved consistent as they emphasized their personal experiences.

Principal One explained that his first actions in the principal’s role would be to spend some time thinking about his own standards and beliefs, “first things first, I would really have to sit down and think through my beliefs and if I agree with the plan or not” (Principal One, January 16, 2012) and then to discuss the situation.

**Four Ethical Frameworks**

The third question focused on the use of the four ethical frameworks, “Which ethical framework, justice, critique, care or the profession, if any, do these principals use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas in the vignettes?” The majority of the principals used the context of the ethic of justice and the ethic of the profession to frame their answers. The ethic of the profession when coding the results was so closely linked to the ethic of justice that several of the principals meshed the two together when resolving the conflicts. It is not that they did not
use the other ethical frameworks. They did but it was not the focus of the resolution to the vignettes provided.

Principal Eight, akin to what Principal Seven said, explains that she also felt that caring is synonymous when talking about the students or the school district. Principal Eight explains that often you can get stuck in the middle when a board of education may not understand what is best for kids:

“I think that you need to look at this dilemma [vignette four] through the superintendent’s eyes. You have to answer to the board that honestly does not understand accountability and what it means in the bigger picture versus trying to comprehend what your kids need and ultimately what is best for the kids” (Principal Eight, February 13, 2012).

The ethic of critique and care were used the least in the participants’ analyses of the four vignettes. The ethic of the profession was used most with the ethic of justice a close second. Most of the principals explained the significance of protocol and accountability over and over again. That they cannot ignore a situation of this magnitude and that the student needs to be made aware of the gravity of the situation.

**Rural Setting**

The last question was “Do rural elementary school principals perceive the rural context as affecting their ability to make difficult ethical decisions? If so, how?” The answer to this question was evident with the first sentence most principals uttered, without the researcher even having to ask it. They began by discussing the challenges of rural existence period. “How can where we live not affect our ethical decision making,” Principal Ten sighed (February 16, 2012). “It is like that saying, you are what you eat, you are what you breathe, here we breathe rural air, drink fresh spring water and eat the food in our backyards, notice no grocery stores here” (Principal Twelve, February 17, 2012).
When exploring this question in the data collected, several elements came to light. All of the principals grew up and attended school in the very schools or neighboring schools where they now lead. The principals’ families all valued education. Finally, all of the principals expressed a comfort with being where they were in their professional careers, with the belief that knowing the community and having the same basic values were crucial to successful decision making.

In every case, the principals had grown up or attended school in the communities where they are now school leaders. This close relationship and understanding of the context in which they work allows the principals a level of insight that seems to aid in their ability to make ethical decisions. Principal Six, whose father was a superintendent, spoke about everybody in the community knowing him or his father. Principal Eight discussed recognizing the needs of the community and not asking families to give too much. Principal Ten remarked on the element of trust that the stakeholders had in him because he was from the area.

In making a rural comparison, some of the principals joked about the suburban area that the researcher was from. “This is not what you are used to” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012) when comparing the building facilities. Principal Seven commented “you know, it is not like where you are from” (February 10, 2012) when explaining that he gets to wear many hats as a building administrator. “When the secretary is out, you are looking at her, not like your town’s school” Principal Three stated as she welcomed the researcher into her office.

Another component of their rural settings was that the principals all had in common was their family’s value in education. But this finding could be the case in an urban setting. All of the principals grew up in areas where college was not an expectation for most children, but they all explained that it was not an option for them. Most of the females said that they were never encouraged to go to college, by family or school officials. As the focus of this work was not a
comparative one, it is difficult to say that the rural setting was a factor in ethical decision making.

But most of the principals’ parents expected them to attend college. This important point was a driving force for them to lead, create opportunities and make critical decisions in their students’ lives of today. All of the principals had a vision and as a school goal for their students to go to obtain further education after high school and encouraged students regularly. “Samantha is an artist, I told her to go into graphic design, her mom thinks it is a waste of time” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012).

In explaining the importance of decision making in the rural context, Principal Five explained that “decision making is not just understanding what to do, but it is also helping others see goals, and create a future themselves when they do not see it themselves” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012). She explained that it was her duty to give these rural students hope and a better future to look forward to, “that is why I came back to be here” (Principal Five, February 8, 2012). Some of the principals reiterated this same view.

**Implications of this Study’s Results**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are offered to rural elementary school principals and other educational leaders. Principals should participate in staff development that provides them with the opportunity to learn about the importance and application of the ethical frameworks of justice, critique, care, and the profession. One example would be for elementary principals to participate in book studies such as *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education* by Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich. Additionally, the principals need time to discuss ethical dilemmas faced at work. Researchers Brown et al.
(2005) pondered whether individuals are born as ethical leaders or are developed through training in the organization. The Hypothetical Scenarios used in this study or similar hypothetical ethical scenarios should be used as a teaching tool in educational leadership preparation classes and in school district workshops and training for current school administrators for discussion of ethical decision making. Finally, this study, with its focus on decision making and ethical leadership and the revealing need for training in ethics, could be implemented in connection with principal preparation programs.

An implication for further research would be to focus on rural schooling. There is a large gap in educational research when it comes to rural schools. “I'd still say that rural education research does not attract American scholars to the same extent that research in reading, math, and science does: nor would we expect it to attract them” (C. Howley, Personal Communication, February 29, 2012). According to Howley researchers have come a long way in the last twenty years but we are still behind in a rural education focus. Scholarly research in rural settings is rarely detailed enough to use in decision making. There is a need for research with a rural focus (C. Howley, Personal Communication, February 29, 2012).

Rural educational institutions convey a lack of qualified educators and principals to fill openings. Of greater concern, is that education preparation programs do not focus on rural education. This is especially troubling when it comes to understanding the disparity between the suburban and urban needs as contrasted with the rural.

One recommendation for colleges and universities with educational administration preparation programs would be to consider offering a rural focus. Several universities allow aspiring administrators to specify an urban focus, but few offer a rural focus.
Finally, this study suggests that administrative preparation programs do not serve aspiring rural leaders or include a rural focus. Most academic institutions, however, do not specifically prepare students for rural service, but they do often focus on preparing principals for an urban or suburban context. This lack of a rural focus is compounded by the lack of people conducting research in the rural context. This study’s results challenge the lack of existing rural research suggesting that more work needs to be done to fully understand the impact of the rural context and to prepare leaders for the challenges that it presents.

Implications for Practice

As the investigator coded the data collected during this study, two different trends emerged that principals working in the rural context may encounter. First, several paradoxes may exist within the rural context that require framing decisions through multiple paradigms. Furthermore, there are elements within the rural context that may strengthen reasons for education within the schools and communities where these leaders work. As with the paradoxes explored in this study, educating rural students presents difficult ethical decisions that rural principals might come across.

These two trends found in the data generated recommendation for practice. Most of the administrators in this study used multiple paradigms to frame difficult decisions. Although the data showed a tendency for the participants to use the ethic of justice or the ethic of the profession, examples were encountered that demonstrate the use of the care and critique paradigm as well. The data suggested that decisions in the rural setting are multifaceted and may require the use of several paradigms in determining an effective course of action. Rural administrators need to understand their own decision making and incorporate multiple frames when considering difficult decisions.
Implications for Policy Making

A suggestion coming out of this study for policy makers is to reassess the “one size fits all” tactic to accountability. The low tax base and inadequate funding found in the districts studied coupled with unfunded federal mandates for accountability put tremendous stress on these districts who are serving communities with perspectives on the purpose of schooling that are different from those of the education institution. These principals find themselves trying to manage a two-sided problem that pulls resources toward state mandates and local needs. State policy makers need to deliberate the limited resources and competing demands that exist within the rural context.

One final recommendation for policy makers would be to develop industry and economic stimulus programs within rural areas. The administrators studied all realized that students who pursue higher education often leave the communities due to a lack of viable employment. This problem is compounded as state mandates on accountability force these rural schools to prepare students for a world that does not exist locally. As the best and brightest students move away, the community does not see the benefits of education. The low tax base remains and the inequities in the community endure. In five of the twelve districts studied, enrollment was consistently declining. Students are moving away, and new families are not moving in. To counter act this trend of declining enrollment and out-migration, state policy makers should look to revitalize rural economies or many rural communities may not survive.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this study suggest a need for additional research related to educational leadership within the rural context.
More research needs to be done to explore the rural context and the leaders working within this context. Rural education leaders as a group are not represented well in the existing knowledge base. This study suggests that the rural context and the variables existing within it may have an impact on educational leadership that differs from urban or suburban settings. It is critical that researchers seek to further understand the phenomenon of educational leadership in the rural context. That scholarship is not simply taken from the urban or suburban arenas and generalized into the rural context.

The review of literature also listed components within the rural environment that are inherent to rural communities and their schools. Again, the administrators explained that many of these elements impact their leadership and their decision making. These components included the following: parental expectation, a low tax base, poverty, and a lack of diversity. Research to further explore these elements within the rural context and their impact on rurality would be beneficial. Comprehending these features is necessary for practicing administrators and policy makers. A comparative study using the same vignettes of urban and rural school districts would further validate the findings of this study.

In addition, applying the vignettes to various education curriculums, the next logical step would be to test the ability of the vignettes to predict moral educational decision making. The following two questions surface as questions to investigate further:

1. Can assumptions one holds about values, people, society, tradition/culture, and morality in action drive one’s choice of ethical decision making?

2. Can exposing principals to various moral education traditions contribute to more informed decisions regarding ethical decision making practice?
These are questions that could be answered through survey research ideas. The answers could also be found in both a survey and then undertaking a 2-5 day observational method of school principals’ decisions. Then the question that would naturally arise would be: Is there a discrepancy between ethical decisions reported via a survey then what is actually practiced? To summarize, the implication of answering these research questions might be that if one follows a logical progression of educating for ethical decision making, certain moral education traditions are bound to result.

To use a more nuanced, fine tuned ethical instrument might lead to completely different results. If one creates and uses different vignettes and they were used in the rural context would this different instrument lead to principals using the ethic of the profession and justice more often than the other frameworks?

**Conclusions**

This study focused specifically on the practice of ethical decision making by school principals. The researcher sought to identify and describe the attitudes and processes which influenced the ethical decision making of school principals. The main topic of this study is how do elementary school principals make ethical decisions in their work? Furthermore, this research addresses the following inquiries:

1. Do ethical factors emerge when administrators provide answers to vignettes of real life dilemmas in schools?
2. Were the decisions principals made regarding the ethical dilemma vignettes governed by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, how?
3. Which ethical framework, justice, critique, care or the profession, if any, do these principals use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas in the vignettes?

4. Do rural elementary school principals perceive the rural context as affecting their ability to make difficult ethical decisions? If so, how?

Several important conclusions were drawn from the findings obtained in this study. First, decision making is a primary, administrative activity. Principals reported that they made numerous decisions each day. In fact, their daily activities were defined as a response to questions or problems. The ability to respond in an appropriate and timely fashion for the best interests of the students was viewed as an important and necessary skill.

Secondly, it was evident that ethics was a necessary element when making decisions for leaders. All of the decisions contained an ethical ingredient so as the administrative leaders had to choose to either do right or wrong. The overall dedication of these educational leaders was to commit to do what was right and forego the wrong that this shed a greater light on the entire educational leadership profession.

Thirdly, gender did not influence ethics. One gender was not found to be more ethical than the other. All of the principals were deeply concerned about ethics issues and their concern influenced the way they practiced administration. In addition, the community values and mores were found to be an important factor.
References


North Central Region Advisory Committee (2005, March). A report to the U.S. Department of Education on educational challenges and technical assistance needs for the north central region.


Wright, P. (2012, February 5). Personal interview.


Appendix A

Principal’s Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions.

1. Age________

2. Gender________

3. Race: ________________________

4. Highest Degree Earned (circle one)
   M.A.      M.Ed      Ed.D      Ph.D      Other _______________

5. Number of years as principal ______________

6. Amount of formal training in ethics at the graduate level (circle one)
   A lot      Some      Little      None

7. Is your school classified as rural? (Circle one)   Yes   No

8. Comments about the study ________________________________
       __________________________________________________________________
       __________________________________________________________________
       __________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your assistance.
Appendix B

Hypothetical Scenarios

After School

Dana, a principal of a small school, had implemented several team building exercises with the help of Mr. Raymond, a long time teacher at the school. One Friday every month was a staff development day. After school, staff go to a happy hour at a local restaurant and bar. This has led to increased collaboration and the curriculum getting stronger. Mrs. Sampson, the most active parent at the school, showed Dana a picture on her Facebook page of a second grade teacher, Florence, drinking a shot of tequila. She was able to access Facebook because she was a “friend” of Mr. Raymond, who was at the restaurant. Florence was in the background of a picture of Mr. Raymond and his wife. Mrs. Sampson wants her son out of the teacher’s class because she views this as irresponsible behavior showing a lack of self control and an inability to handle a second grade classroom.

5. What issues are at stake here?
6. What should the principal do? (if necessary, probe for why/justification)
7. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
8. What possible risks or “downsides” are there to your action/decision?

Buddhism and Animals

A central tenet to the practice of Buddhism is the caring and welfare of all creatures of the Earth. The belief discourages any human being from harming any living creature. Sophia, 8 years old, is a Buddhist student. Her teacher introduced the curriculum in the beginning of the school year by showing the students live bugs they would have to feed the class frog. Each student was to have a week of feeding the frog. Sophia was troubled and hurt by this and after three weeks of witnessing the students feed the live bugs to the frog she set the bugs and the frog free at recess. Sophia was sent to the principal’s office. The principal is concerned about respecting diversity in her school but usually such an offense could merit suspension.

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the principal do? (if necessary, probe for why/justification)
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or “downsides” are there to your action/decision?
**Deaf Education**

Ms. Johnson, an American Sign Language (ASL) teacher, was assigned to sign the questions and answer choices on a mandated test verbatim as they are written in English. Three months later the test results arrived with the deaf students doing significantly better in Ms. Johnson’s class than in the other deaf education class. Ms. Johnson was called into the principal’s office where she explained that she did sign “conceptually accurate” ASL instead of “verbatim” English word order because she stated that signing correct ASL gives students a clearer picture of the questions and levels the playing field for deaf students. She finally stated to the principal, “I have a moral obligation to fight for the rights of deaf students so as to ensure that they are given the same opportunities as the other students.”

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the principal do? (if necessary, probe for why/justification)
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or “downsides” are there to your action/decision?

**Zero Tolerance**

The school has a zero tolerance policy on bringing weapons to school. Andrew, a sixth grade student who volunteers at the after-school math tutoring program, approached the principal in the hallway and said, “You have to suspend me from school.” Andrew proceeded to explain that he has a knife in his backpack because he was at Boy Scouts late last night and forgot to remove it from his backpack when he came to school that morning.

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the principal do? (if necessary, probe for why/justification)
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or “downsides” are there to your action/decision?
Appendix C
Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research   The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Ethical Decision Making of Rural PA Elementary School Principals
Principal Investigator: Researcher Representing PSU: Wafa Hozien, Graduate Student
University Park, PA 16802  wvh5059@psu.edu
Advisor: Dr. Jacqueline Stefkovich / 207C Rackley
University Park, PA 16802  jas71@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: This study is being conducted for research purposes only. The purpose of this research study is to understand what ethical framework do rural elementary school principals in the state of Pennsylvania use when making decisions: the ethic of care, critique, profession or justice.

2. Procedures to be followed: A piece of paper with four scenarios, one paragraph in length, will be given to you. You will then read them and answer verbally four questions at the end of each scenario. The Penn State Researcher, Wafa Hozien, will record your responses. The recordings will be stored in a secure setting and discarded within 30 days of the interview.

3. Duration: It will take about 45-60 minutes to read four scenarios and answer four questions at the end of each scenario. This will be recorded. You can ask to stop the recording at any time. You can ask to stop this study at any time.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at (University Park, PA 16802) in a (locked filing cabinet) file. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

5. Right to Ask Questions: Please contact Dr. Stefkovich with questions or concerns about this study.

6. Voluntary Participation: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

7. Note that participation is voluntary; that you may end your participation at any time; that you may choose to not answer any specific question(s).

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.
You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_________________________________________   _____________________________
Participant Signature                  Date

_________________________________________   _____________________________
Person Obtaining Consent             Date
Appendix D

Demographic Information PA Rural Elementary School Principals

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VITA

Wafa Hozien
State College, PA 16802
wafa.hozien@gmail.com

Education

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<td>2009-2018</td>
<td>Pennsylvania State U.</td>
<td>Ph.D Program in Education Leadership</td>
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<td>1987-1989</td>
<td>William Paterson University</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts Political Science</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Rutgers University</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Seton Hall University</td>
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Publications


Hozien, W. (Forthcoming) Principal Retention, Challenges and Solutions. The Journal of Education Policy, Planning and Administration.


Papers Presented at Professional Meetings


Hozien, W. In the Technology Age: Privacy Rights and the Law in Schools. The Penn State Social Thought Conference, University Park, PA, April 7, 2012. (To Be Presented).


Hozien, W. Female Education Administration Decision Making in Pennsylvania. International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, Madrid, Spain, November 14, 2011. Was skyped in due to attendance at UCEA.


