11-1-2018

# Decision-Making And Ethics: A Study Of Massachusetts Superintendents

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DECISION-MAKING AND ETHICS:
A STUDY OF MASSACHUSETTS SUPERINTENDENTS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty

Of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Maine

September, 2018

Maryann Perry
September, 2018
Educational Leadership

DECISION-MAKING AND ETHICS:
A STUDY OF MASSACHUSETTS SUPERINTENDENTS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to see if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose was to comprehend, as portrayed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which moral frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession) were used, assuming any were actualized by Massachusetts superintendents in decision-making. Superintendents require methods and processes that assist them to probe, "the ethical depths of each situation that calls for a judgment" (Rebore, 2013, p. 31). For this qualitative study, the modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis by Clark Moustakas' (1994) and Robert Nash's (2002) three moral languages was used when examining the phenomenological data. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in response to four vignettes and the same four questions at the end of each vignette. The eight superintendents who were interviewed used multiple paradigms when solving ethical dilemmas and their experience influenced the paradigms they used most often. The superintendents utilized the ethics of justice and the profession more than the ethic of care and the profession. The superintendents' moral languages flowed from the first, second, and third languages throughout the interviews. Understanding ethics can aid superintendents to apply the multiple paradigms when thinking about values and ethics and their applications to real situations.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey would not have been possible without the support of my family. I thank my husband, Tony, who supported me with encouragement and laughter as I went through each course and the dissertation. I would like to thank my mother, Rosalie, who made sure I had coffee and dessert every time I sat at the dining room table and began my coursework and the writing of my dissertation. To my children; Andrew, Nikki, Anthony, and Kelli; who watched me and continued to support me in this endeavor as they began their journeys in life.

I would like to thank Dr. Willaim Boozang and Dr. Mary Colleen Patterson, who guided me through the process. I deeply appreciate the efforts of everyone at the University of New England. A special thank you to my colleagues; Cathy, Debra, Kellie, Chirsty, and Dani. We began this journey together and through our emails, text, and Skype calls, we encouraged, supported, and praised each other during good times and difficult times. We did it, ladies!

To my grandson, Drew, I pass on to you my desire to always learn. Life is what you make of it, so I encourage you to go and conquer the world. Thank you God for giving me the support of family and friends; that is priceless.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders face many challenges in the 21st century, make decisions daily, and as policymakers must make ethical choices. School superintendents encounter moral dilemmas on a daily basis. The American Association of School Administrators Statement of Ethics for School Administrators (2007) stated, "an educational administrator's professional behavior must conform to an ethical code [and] the educational administrator makes the well-being of students the fundamental value of all decision-making and actions" (p. 1).

Across the country, school superintendents have been under tremendous stress to improve their districts and student achievement (Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013; McDermott, 2010). Superintendents make critical decisions regarding their staff, finances, and student learning. In addition to these priorities, superintendents provide leadership to central office staff, school building principals, assistant principals, teachers, instructional and support staff, and students. Superintendents commit to leading their districts and need to be ready to self-reflect. According to the American Association of School Administrators (2005), "One of a superintendent's most critical roles is to convene and persuade rather than dictate exclusively from the top" (p. 7).

The immediate and significant ethical ramifications of the actions of superintendents affect the district and community at large (Calabrese & Roberts, 2001). Superintendents have considerable influence over many aspects of the school system, and the success or failure weighs heavily on their leadership. According to Hoyle, English, and Steffy (1998), "The charge for school leaders is clear—model accepted moral and ethical behavior" (p. 169). The position is

one of energy, esteem, honesty, and duty; the superintendent's exposure is to both open investigation and self-examination (Starratt, 2012).

Thomas Sobol, who taught ethics at Columbia University's Teachers College, believed the superintendent must bring an "ethical dimension" to education that acknowledges moral obligations and decision-making (as cited in Pardini, 2004, p. 10). Governed by guidelines, these decisions reach beyond the set of circumstances under examination. The act of decision-making is a choice dictated by some standard, which is separate from the alternatives. With an extensive review of the literature, Brown and Trevino (2006) stated ethical leadership is the demonstration of self-reflection and multiple connections and the advancement of such conduct to supporters through two-way correspondence, fortification, and central administration. Various scholars (Fullan, 2003; Greenfield, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) conducted research and acknowledged the importance of ethics, morals, and core values in educational leadership in a changing political, social, and economic environment. While the topic of ethical leadership is increasingly relevant, it is vital that leaders be not only proficient but also righteous in their daily interactions.

Many researchers have believed the study of leadership with the critical topics of ethical decision making and moral judgment is crucial for organizational leaders, especially educational leaders (Ciulla, 2014; Maxcy, 2002; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 2017). Educational leaders such as superintendents understand their decisions and actions determine the success of their districts (Harvey, 2013). Values and ethics guide responsible educational leadership. Superintendents are accountable for modeling the ethical and moral conduct they expect from staff and students. Although many educational leaders view ethics and philosophy as topics far removed from day-to-day operations of managing a district, the fact they view the children of

their district as the number one responsibility is an ethical consideration (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

## Statement of the Problem

According to Fenstermaker (1996), past national research has shown the vast majority of superintendents surveyed proved to be unethical in decision-making. Ethical responses increased by less than 1% after a 25-year period elapsed (Fenstermaker, 1996). Fenstermaker (1996) reported potential reasons for the unethical responses are related to the inadequacies of school leaders to identify the ethical depth of issues or the superintendent's decisions resulted from instinct or experience, which did not consider ethical components. School leaders must be able to recognize ethical issues and make moral choices based on ethical standards to prevent the deterioration of both school leadership and the public school system (Fenstermaker, 1996).

"Ethics is the study of moral practice" (Starratt, 1996, p. 155) and education is concerned with understanding ethics and the actions coming from decisions made. The field of education grapples with different ethical frameworks, but there has not been significant research in the decision-making process of superintendents. Three types of ethics that have affected the educational profession, specifically in educational leadership, are justice, care, and critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 1996). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) focused on the multiple ethical paradigms as a framework and stated the three original frameworks did not sufficiently describe the many different factors in education that leaders needed to contemplate when making ethical decisions and they added a fourth framework called the ethics of the profession. If superintendents want to be productive leaders, they must strive to practice regular ethical decision-making on an everyday basis (McDermott, 2010).

The problem is that there has been limited research to determine whether superintendents recognize the ethical dimensions of issues and make decisions based on the multiple ethical paradigms, or if they continue (as Fenstermaker noted) to make decisions based on instinct or experience. Several authors have concurred more research on ethical leadership is required (Beckner, 2004; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Ciulla, 1998; Davies, 2005; Rebore, 2013). Ethics in educational leadership is an unknown domain "offering researchers opportunities for discoveries and leaders' opportunities to improve their effectiveness" (Brown & Trevino, 2006, p. 1).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose was to comprehend, as portrayed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which moral frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession), assuming any, were actualized by Massachusetts administrators in decision-making.

The researcher interviewed a sample of Massachusetts superintendents to gather data for this phenomenological study. The semi-structured interview process consisted of each superintendent reading four ethical dilemmas and responding to the same set of four questions for each dilemma. The interviews were sound recorded and professionally transcribed. The researcher analyzed findings from this investigation to determine an association between multiple ethical paradigms and practices, and to comprehend the moral decision-making and leadership procedures of a selected group of superintendents in Massachusetts.

**Research Questions**

This study focused on the process of ethical decision-making by Massachusetts superintendents. The researcher identified and described the principles and progression that influenced the decision-making of a sample of superintendents working in Massachusetts.

The research began with an overarching question: How do superintendents in Massachusetts make ethical decisions in their work? In addition, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools?

2. Were decisions superintendents made regarding ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, which standard?

3. Which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, or the profession), if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical lens through which this study was viewed evolved from the multiple ethical paradigms (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The theoretical framework from Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) used four ethical paradigms: justice, critique, care, and the profession. The foundation of Shapiro and Stefkovich's work emerged from case study investigations relating to ethical dilemmas. In their work, the authors referenced other educational frameworks based on reflective practices, providing real-life scenarios to demonstrate the ethical paradigms. Using a set of moral standards enables the individual to reflect on moral standards before settling on a decision or response (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

A second theoretical lens was the analysis of language through Nash's use of three moral languages. The three moral languages overlap and are interdependent with each other. The first moral language is rooted in an individual's belief system, the second moral language is the character of the person, and the third moral language is the language used to describe rules, principals, and theories. The application of rules, principles, and theories is deeply influenced by stories, traditions, and virtues. According to Nash (2002), "these in turn shape and are shaped by a number of structural realities that affect all ethical decision-making" (p. 23).

The relationship between ethics and decision-making among Massachusetts superintendents forms the conceptual framework for this study. The ethical behavior of the leader of an organization has a considerable effect on the ethical behavior of others in the organization (Starratt, 2017). The leader is responsible for the criteria that guide the conduct of employees in an association. Hitt (1990) stated ethics and leadership go hand-in-hand, "An ethical environment is favorable to effective leadership, and effective leadership is favorable to an ethical environment. Ethics and leadership act as both cause and effect" (p. 1).

## Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

A limitation is an unmanageable hazard to the inside legitimacy of an examination. Inward authenticity increases the probability that the aftereffects of the investigation mean what the expert intends (Creswell, 2015). One accepted a semi-structured interview was the proper instrument and the information and data collected were meaningful. The researcher was cognizant and legitimate to control any bias. This investigation was centered, however, adaptable in design. The superintendents' decision-making was reported and expressed an accurate account of the process. The researcher worked to assure confidentiality and to promote open and honest responses.

The instrument and its predictive ability limited this study. The vignettes might not be as refined as they should be. This research was further limited to a description of the actual participants as opposed to a broader sampling of the population. This study's limitations were the awareness, outlook, position, and interactions of the participant sample (superintendents) in Massachusetts. All subjects in this study were volunteers who could opt to withdraw from this study at any time. The scope of the study was limited to Massachusetts; it was vital for the researcher to avoid overgeneralization while analyzing results and mindful when providing recommendations that extended beyond Massachusetts superintendents.

## Significance

This study was significant to the field of educational leadership and its stakeholders because it examined the decision-making of superintendents in Massachusetts when faced with moral dilemmas. It explored the values and principles of superintendents as well as the moral reasoning methods (multiple ethical paradigms) in which they engaged as they made decisions. This study adds to the research regarding the processes superintendents use to make decisions.

The superintendent was the recognized leader of the school district (Harvey et al., 2013). The role of superintendents has become increasingly difficult, as they face a particular set of ethical demands (Fullan, 2003; Maxcy, 2002). Confronting state testing, collaborating with stakeholders, and appropriating resources represent a few of these claims. A district leader's responsibility is complex and multidimensional, rooted less in technical expertise and more in human integrity (Duignan, 2012; Lashway, 1996; Starratt, 2017). With the difficulties that face today's schools, administrators must, "have the resolve of character to stand by a strong code of ethics and shun political expediency; their quest should be to do the right thing at all times" (Mijares, 1996, p. 29). There is a real need for educational leaders to call on their core values

when leading in complex and dynamic situations. Duignan and Cannon (as cited in Duignan, 2012) suggested, "when all seems to be in constant crisis and when strategic direction seems to be swamped by short-term emergencies, leaders need to focus on core values and moral purpose" (p. 92). Although advice for high moral and ethical standards of behavior is easy to understand, it is increasingly difficult to adhere to in contemporary society (Hoyle et al., 1998).

According to Fenstermaker (1996), the decisions made by the district's most significant link to the community have not always been ethical ones. This lack of ethical decision-making has produced public skepticism of the school administrator position (p. 16). The superintendent must consistently seek ethical standards in decision-making to create an ethical institution (Starratt, 2017). Educational administrators must take the moral high ground. According to Maxcy (2002), "Ethics of educational leadership is superior, ethics is a part of leadership and not grafted upon it from the outside or added simply for the sake of accomplishing some goal" (p. 47). To be an effective moral leader, a person must make a strong commitment to "making a positive difference in the lives of individual students and teachers" (Fullan, 2003, p. 31).

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms and definitions were used:

- *Ethics.* Ethics, according to John Dewey (as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) "is the science that deals with conduct as far as this is considered to be right or wrong, good or bad" (p. 10).

- *Ethical decision-making.* Ethical decision-making is the process of evaluating and choosing among alternatives in a manner consistent with ethical principles (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).

- *Ethical dilemma.* An ethical dilemma is a perplexing situation that involves a conflict among values, beliefs, and ideas; a case that presents two sides, each rooted in primary, core values (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

- *Multiple ethical paradigms.* The multiple ethical paradigms cross over and combine various approaches to ethics. The four paradigms include justice, care, critique, and the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

- *Superintendent.* The superintendent is the highest-ranking leader in a public school district who is responsible for the daily operations, student achievement, and financial and human resources of the district. The superintendent is hired and evaluated by the school committee for a specific contract period (Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013).

- *Vignette.* A vignette is a short narrative description that expresses very clearly and neatly the typical characteristics of the thing it represents (Vignette, n.d.).

## Conclusion

To many people, the school leader represents all staff and programs of the school district (Hoyle et al., 2005). The superintendent is required to make decisions that affect students, families, staff, and community members. These decisions set the moral compass for the district. It is crucial for these decisions to be ethical. Therefore, administrators are obligated to act ethically and must make sound, ethical decisions. As superintendents deal with everyday dilemmas, they endeavor to balance their decision-making with the obligations of their profession and their personal values (Duignan, 2012). Administrators cannot apply ethics in decision-making only when it is convenient or someone is watching, "Ethical behavior is not something that can be held in reserve for momentous issues; it must be a constant companion"

(Lashway, 1996, p. 4). An educational leader cannot waver when facing the complexities of the modern school environment. School districts need leaders with public and demonstrated integrity (Hoyle et al., 2005).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Ethical leadership is the ability to influence individuals or groups through core values and beliefs and embrace what is described as right behavior. The purpose of this study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The goal was to comprehend, as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession), assuming any, were actualized by Massachusetts superintendents when making decisions. *Ethical dilemmas* was the term used to qualify an incident that calls for a decision to be made when core values conflict. This research studied how superintendents encountered a dilemma, how they solved the dilemma, and whether they used the multiple ethical paradigms as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016). Constrained exact investigations of instructive experts' reactions to moral issues have sought to illuminate the multifaceted nature of educational professionals' decision-making. Studies of superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas revealed the frequency and complexity of ethical dilemmas and indicated the need for more research into the phenomenon (Duignan, 2007; Langlois & Lapointe, 2010).

Prior research in educational organizations has led to the development of various ethical decision-making models (Anderson & Davies, 2000; Cooper, 1998; Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 2012). These hypotheses uncover the subjective procedure of basic leadership, priority managing, and the variables that influence the decision-maker. Starratt (1996) was the first to propose multidimensional ethics, which was expanded by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) into the multiple ethical paradigms approach. This theory of

ethical decision-making combines various approaches: the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1992, 2003), the ethic of justice (Kohlberg, 1981; Strike et al., 2005), the ethic of critique (Apple, 2006; Shapiro & Purpel, 1993), and the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The multiple ethical paradigms was the theoretical framework for this study. This study explored the overall research question: How do superintendents make ethical decisions identified with their work? This examination analyzed the philosophies, ethical framework, methods of insight, and processes used by Massachusetts school superintendents in making ethical choices.

This review of literature presented pertinent theory and research for the decision-making of superintendents. The first section yielded an overview of the philosophy of ethics. The second section explored the ethical framework of the multiple ethical paradigms approach (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The third section emphasized superintendents' decision-making. The fourth section defined ethical leadership. This chapter concluded with the conceptual framework and a summary of the reviewed literature.

## Philosophy of Ethics

Ethics and morality in superintendents' positions have been of interest because, "the moral character of the leader is involved in every moral and ethical decision made in a school" (Maxcy, 2002, p. 36). The moral issues superintendents must confront on a daily basis have become newsworthy for society and have increased the awareness of and the need for ethical superintendents. Ethics is a part of the study of philosophy known as *moral philosophy*. This area of theory attempts to clarify questions about morality, virtue, justice, restraint, compassion, and discernment (Beckner, 2004; Berghofer & Schwartz, 2007; Lama, 1999; Rebore, 2013; Strike, 2007). There are two general pathways to ethics: deontological and teleological.

According to Singer (1993), deontological ethics originates from the Greek word *deon,* which means *duty,* whereas teleological comes from the Greek word *telos,* which means *goal.* For deontologists, some specific acts are morally unacceptable by themselves because of one's duty, authority, or responsibility. For teleologists, the rightness or wrongness of actions or practices is determined by a comparative assessment of their consequences (Broad, 2013; Singer, 1993).

**Teleological Ethics**

Teleological ethics is *a posteriori* since the morality of a belief or practice is based on the results. Teleological ethics is also referred to as practical and functional ethics or consequentialism. Consequentialism is the view that whatever values an individual or an institution adopts as its accepted foundation, the proper response is to promote and advance those values (Broad, 2013; Singer, 1993).

Despite having underlying foundations in the Epicurean rationality of old Greece, the morals of teleology encountered a resurrection with the 19th-century British induction of David Hume (1711-1776). Hume rejected regular law models of ethical quality and endeavored to demonstrate that a virtue-centered, focused hypothesis could best function for ethical and moral convictions. Morality, he contended, must be rooted in emotion, not rationality, because passion moves one to action and reason alone can never do so (Morris, Brown, & Hume, 2017). Approval and disapproval are moral feelings. Consent is given to those acts that are beneficial to others (Schneewind, 1992).

Teleological ethics was popularized by the utilitarianism of political philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). While attempting to look for lawful and correctional philanthropic change, Bentham adopted the Epicurean rationality of mental debauchery where each individual tries to achieve delight and avoid torment. This ultimate

moral principle was called the principle of utility or the law of greatest happiness (Mill as cited in Cahn, 2014). Mill concurred with Bentham about the standard idea of the most noteworthy principle; however, he separated the amount and nature of delights and put more responsibility on the individual than on the state (Mill, as cited in Cahn, 2014). In addition, to gain ultimate happiness, Mill, as political philosophy, emphasized to achieve the highest standard of social and distributive justice, the efforts of both organizations and all virtuous citizens should be made in the highest degree in order to converge (Burtt, 1994; Mill, as cited in Cahn, 2014).

Maxcy (2002) stated, "One of the most influential ideas in social science today is John Rawls's Theory of Justice" (p. 92). The concept of justice was supported from as early as Plato to Dewey, Piaget, and Kohlberg. Notable, however, is that Rawls's social justice hypothesis has often been regularly understood as deontological due to its emphasis on the twin principles of desirability and feasibility, independent of whether it produces good (Kukathas & Pettit, 1990). The original position is not an actual circumstance but a hypothetical situation that would lead to an understanding of justice, not to explain human actions, "except insofar as it tries to account for our moral judgments and helps to explain our having a sense of justice" (Rawls, 1999, p. 107). In the original position, Rawls was not saying freedoms, equality, and fairness are all there are to justice. Who one is and one's family are still relevant (Katz, Noddings, & Strike, 1999). Rawls actually stated, "In our role as citizens we cannot seek to write the rules so that they favor us and ours" (Katz et al., p. 34).

Teleological ethics is emotional and emphasizes results rather than rules. Incorporated into teleological ethical frameworks and moral structures are constructs such as fairness, justice, care, diversity, and democracy. A teleological approach to ethics produces, in the words of

English pragmatist Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), the *summum bonum,* or the most good (Liebhafsky, 1986).

**Deontological Ethics**

The deontological approach is just the opposite of the teleological approach, as it "seeks only for the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of an act regardless of the consequences and is focused on the adherence to independent moral rules or duties" (Sendjaya, 2005, p. 80). Deontological ethics is sometimes referred to as natural law or normative ethics. Natural law is the view that there is an unchanging standard order that is part of the natural world and that rules governing human conduct are grounded in nature (Buckle, 1993; Cahn, 2014). Normative ethics can be traced to the syllogistic reasoning of Aristotle and allude to the investigation of proper thought and conduct, and when a particular action is taken, it must be founded on a general guiding principle (Frankena, 1973).

Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) theory follows the deontological approach to ethical theory. Kant sought the relationship between ethics and knowledge, a debate that raged during the Enlightenment. The most noted and fundamental element of Kant's thinking was the critical component of the *categorical imperative*. With the categorical imperative, Kant rejected a means-to-an-end theory as inadequate for moral purpose and proposed an ultimate standard for judging both personal morality and ethics as a whole (Kant, as cited in Cahn, 2014). As an imperative, Kant's rule demands actions in a certain way, without qualification, unconditionally, as rational beings; morality is a demand first and a display of character second (Hoffe, 1994). Kant's categorical imperative appeals to complex ideas and unfamiliar language. Kant argued theories of act and rule. Deontological theory suggests the individual's intent makes a subsequent action morally right or morally wrong (Kant, as cited in Cahn, 2014).

Deontological ethics is a *priori*; that is to say, the rightness of an action is based on forethought and concluded beforehand or is rational. A deontological approach to ethics is not hypothetical; it emphasizes intent over results. Deontological ethics is rule- or code-oriented and is inclusive of legal mandates and professional policy (Kant, as cited in Cahn, 2014).

## Ethical Frameworks

An ethical framework is a fundamental assumption about values, beliefs, and principles used to guide choices (Starratt, 2004). As contemporary scholars began to research the ethics of justice, care, and critique, Starratt (1994) combined these perspectives into the most recognized ethical framework in education, the tripartite framework.

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) text, *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas,* provided a complete, diverse pedagogical view of ethics and decision-making from multiple ethical paradigms. The authors stated the study of ethics in schools is essential. They suggested, "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). In the theoretical framework of Shapiro and Stefkovich's multiple ethical paradigm, justice, care, critique, and the profession frequently become a part of the superintendent's daily interaction while making decisions within the school district. These decisions most often have a practical application with overarching themes derived from the multiple ethical paradigm.

In education, the combinations of different moral theories create a robust system of beliefs, "Dilemmas in educational institutions can be complicated and may naturally lead to the use of two or more paradigms to solve problems" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 7). Fullan (2003) and Furman (2004) asserted that as role models, educational leaders must work to form a

culture and community that represent the ethical values these educational leaders uphold. The multiple ethical paradigm includes the ethics of justice, critique, care, and the profession. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), "Justice, critique, and care are familiar to many in the field of educational leadership" (p. 7). The use of the multiple ethical paradigms guides leaders in making a decision using both reason and emotions, "They will offer educational leaders a set of concepts and tools that will be of use to them throughout their professional lives" (Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. xi). The research of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) was used as a theoretical framework for understanding superintendents' perspectives about how they made an ethical decision.

**The Ethic of Justice**

Justice serves as the foundation for legal principles, ideals, rights, laws, fairness, and equity in individual freedom (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 1994; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004). In an educational setting, justice plays a part in the legal aspect of policies and laws. According to Starratt (2017), the idea of fairness and equal treatment becomes the core value of the ethic of justice. Shapiro and Gross (2013) affirmed the ethic of justice continually raises questions about the justness and fairness of laws and policies. Also, authors Strike et al. (2005), and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) noted the ethic of justice underpins the standard of due process and ensures and protects the civil and human rights and privileges of all individuals. Strike et al. (2005) maintained the effect of justice in educational decision-making based on maximum benefits concerning individual needs. The research supported Shapiro and Stefkovich's view that school administrators who considered each member of the community before making an ethical decision used the ethic of justice, as they intended to be fair and equitable. According to Starratt (2017):

In a school setting, both are required in that . . . individual choices are made with

some awareness of what the community's choices are, and school community

choices are made with some awareness of the kinds of individual choices that are

made every day in school. (p. 84)

To act justly is both an individual concern and a responsibility. It is also a concern and

responsibility to the community.

**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. The ethic of care also affects the educational setting. Nell Noddings

(1992) affirmed, "The first job of schools is to care for children" (p. 16). Noddings (1992) stated

we could not separate education from personal experience, "Who we are, to whom we are

related, how we have 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 one's memories of

caring and being cared for. The ethic of care brings the focal point of fundamental moral

decision-making and leadership to how the individuals involved are treated. Caring consists of

venturing past one's frame of reference into the other's and is characterized by moving away

from one's self (Mitten, 2006). In an ethic of care, one responds to another out of love or natural

inclination, and the focus becomes connectedness and relationships (Mitten, 2006). Genuine

caring and understanding of others have been shown to aid in their empowerment (Mitten, 2006).

The ethic of care stems from the ethic of justice and shifts the focus from rights and laws

to compassion and empathy (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Furman (2004) noted the ethic of

care balances the ethic of justice and critique, as it is centered less on fairness and is more

concerned with and focused on caring for individuals as unique persons. The ethic of care requires full regard for the dignity and intrinsic value of each person based on relationship demands, care, and respect in relationships with others (Noddings, 2003).

In her 1995 article, Noddings expressed, "Caring is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable. 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 emphasized, "caring educators must help students make wise decisions" (p. 4). Noddings (1988) further explained the ethic of care as "moral education, from the perspective of an ethic of caring, involves modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation" (p. 222).

Sometimes, educational leaders have a top-down mentality when making ethical decisions; instead, they should lead by focusing on relationships and connections (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Starratt (2017) stated:

> A school community committed to ethics of caring will be grounded in the belief
> that the integrity of human relationships should be held sacred, and that the school
> as an organization should hold the good of human beings within it as sacred
> (p. 86). Superintendents 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)

**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 is based on the work of scholars such as Apple (2006) and the writings of Foucault (1994), Freire (1970), and Giroux (as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The ethic

of critique derives from critical theory, focusing on social class and inequities. One of the primary arguments of theorists is that the schools reproduce the disparities in society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Educators who work from a critical theory perspective seek to find a voice for those who have been silenced.

Superintendents 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 (Freire, as cited in Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. 27; Furman, 2004). The ethic of critique challenges the status quo by involving social discourse, which allows the marginalized voice and exposes inequities (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Giroux defined the ethic as one 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, as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The ethic of critique presses 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, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The authors confirmed the ethic of critique compelled school administrators to rethink, redefine, and reframe concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and, in particular, social injustice. Starratt (2017) argued:

> The ethic of critique . . . calls for the school community to embrace a sense of responsibility—not simply to the individuals in the school or school system, and not simply to the education profession, but to the society of whom and for whom the school is an agent. (p. 82)

**The Ethic of the Profession**

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) suggested the ethical frameworks of justice, critique, and care needed expanding. The authors called 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 (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004). Shapiro and Gross (2013) noted, the ethic of the profession often means codes, rules, and principles, all of which align with the traditional concepts of justice, but they stated their perception of the ethic of the profession considers other paradigms, such as professional judgment and professional decision-making.

In the role of educational leaders, the ethic of the profession has an overarching goal in the decision-making process, particularly for superintendents, in how they make ethical decisions in their work. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) recognized professional ethics as "a dynamic process requiring administrators to develop their own personal and professional codes" (p. 23). The authors explained a code applied in one stage of life might not be the same over time. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), 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 call on them to place students at the center of the ethical
> decision-making process. (p. 27)

Shapiro and Stefkovich drew from Nash's (2002) perspective, as he raised 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, 2002, p. 36). Nash (2002) emphasized the need to train

teachers in ethics and described conceptions of ethics and their implications for developing the teacher's ability to make careful moral decisions based on these understandings.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) concluded those professional codes of ethics serve as guideposts for the profession, giving statements about its image and character. Shapiro and Stefkovich contended this paradigm needs to be viewed more broadly, more inclusively, and more contemporarily. Thus, taking all these factors into consideration, Shapiro and Stefkovich's ethic of the profession would have administrators examine student outcomes within the justice, critique, and care paradigms. Additionally, Shapiro and Stefkovich's ethic would mandate that teachers must go beyond these questions to ask what the profession would expect, and what is in the best interests of the students, considering they may represent highly diverse populations (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

**Multiple Ethical Paradigms**

Shapiro and Stefkovich believed the practical application of the multiple ethical paradigms has a direct relational connection for understanding complex paradoxical dilemmas. When these conflicts become apparent in the multitude of issues that arise throughout the superintendent's day, he or she should consider using one or more of these ethical frameworks. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) summarized the ethical frameworks, suggesting the ethic of justice includes equality and equity while the ethic of care challenges impartiality and detachment, replacing it with compassion and equity. They continued that the ethic of critique raises questions surrounding the treatment of diverse groups in society. Finally, they suggested the ethic of the profession continually questions equity and the evolving needs of students, and a combination of both supports the best interests of the student.

Therefore, this study, through the theoretical framework of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), critically analyzed the similarities and differences among Massachusetts school superintendents about decision-making. The multiple ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession were employed as the conceptual framework for this study, which examined ethics and ethical reasoning with a focus on school superintendents.

### Analyzing Data Through Language

*In Real World Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Professionals*, R. J. Nash (2002) categorized all moral discourse into one of three languages. According to Nash, the first moral language originates in an individual's background beliefs, those taken-for-granted of how the world is or how the world should be (Nash, 2002, p. 36). These assumptions often go unnoticed in all but the most reflective people, but as Nash asserted, they provide the foundation from which individual ethical thought emanates. Nash stressed, "the purpose of the first language is not to solve concrete problems" (Nash, 2002, p. 40). The major purpose is for individuals to go as deeply as possible into the "metaphysical basement" to understand their ethical centers of reference (Nash, 2002, p. 40).

Nash described 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. This is the language of "thick description," and it allows a fuller, much more colorful moral response to ethical dilemmas" (Nash, 2002, p. 58). In this language, people use terms related to "virtue, narrative, community, feelings, structures, and ideals" (Nash, p. 61). The second moral language centers on the premise that individuals grow into their moral selves, and continue to grow throughout life. 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, individuals talk about whether an action was "in character" or "out of character" for them (Nash, p. 67). Ethical decision-making in the second moral language is shaped by the important communities in an individual's life, 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 described the third moral language in terms of rules, principles, and theories. A "thin" language is basically procedural. "It relies not on specific familial, religious, political, or metaphysical accounts or morality, but on abstract, general, and principled accounts" (Nash, 2002, p. 110). The third moral language functions as a law or a guide to action to enable the individuals to seek to clarify and justify decisions on ethical dilemmas because the language provides standards.

## Decision-Making and the Superintendent

Superintendents are the appointed or elected leaders of the educational organization known as the school district. Superintendents provide educational leadership and oversee the daily procedures of the district (i.e., human resources, curriculum, instruction, finances, and facilities). They are also expected to be honest and have integrity and goodwill, essential considerations for superintendents in the decision-making process. The procedure of overseeing school districts has become more complicated and demanding as the culture and schools advance in complexity (DeVore & Martin, 2008).

### Responsibilities

Successful leaders must be conscious of their responsibilities for providing the necessary supports for their school districts to be effective. Districts led by effective superintendents

ensure the best educational setting (Browne, 2014; Kowalski, 2006). From the beginning, the role of the superintendent has evolved through four stages: clerical, master educator, manager, and chief executive officer of the school board (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). In the early 1900s, the superintendent's role was clerical in nature, mostly dealing with day-to-day operations of the district. As pedagogy became more complex, school boards expected the superintendent to become experts on curriculum and instruction. In addition to these curriculum and instruction initiatives, the era of budgets, transportation, and facilities maintenance brought on new responsibilities for the superintendent. Ultimately, "the call in American education was for leadership, political savvy, reform, community responsiveness, and improved education" (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 24). In response to the increased demands of the position, the responsibilities of the superintendent grew.

Daresh and Aplin (1987) conducted an eight-week-long case study of a superintendent who led a district of 6,000 students for 17 years. The qualitative study focused on the responsibilities of the superintendent and how he managed those duties. Daresh and Aplin (1987) learned the superintendent made the district's commitment to improving curriculum and instruction abundantly clear. It was found that the superintendent could influence other people in the district to "buy in" to his practice and values. The superintendent's philosophy was mirrored in the behaviors of other administrators in the district, which in turn, influenced staff, students, and parents. According to the authors, communication, positive relationships, and positively influencing others are crucial attributes to ensure success for the superintendent. As the district leader, the superintendent must facilitate district initiatives by effectively communicating their overall value to the district and collaborating with all stakeholders to promote change (Daresh & Aplin, 1987).

**Superintendents' Decision-Making**

Many factors contribute to the decisions made by superintendents. Given the complexity of the educational leader's role, he or she is faced with a variety of decisions on a daily basis. The process of making rational and objective decisions necessitates the superintendent viewing every conceivable choice, assigning values to each choice, and selecting the best choice (Kowalski, 2006). The number of stakeholders to whom the superintendent must report, including the school committee, community members, faculty, students, parents, the business community, public interest groups, and town leaders, makes the decision-making process complex. How and why decisions are made, including professional values, personal values, and external forces, all provide greater insight into the ethical choices made by district leaders.

Langlois (2004) conducted a study of practicing superintendents in the Quebec Provincial School System. His research focused on whether superintendents were more influenced by personal ethics than by externally-imposed ethics when making decisions. Langlois (2004) found superintendents often mentioned their desire to remain true to their values and beliefs while remaining authentic in their words and actions. The key factors that influenced how they made decisions were personal values, professional values, and a great deal of reflection. The research showed the overall process of solving complex problems was extremely time-consuming, and ultimately, the ethics of the superintendent drove the process. The author reported common steps taken by superintendents before making important decisions included data gathering, inquiry, comparison, reflection, and analysis. The superintendents who participated in the study reported they often considered the effects of their decisions on all stakeholders before rendering a decision. The exercise of sound moral judgment ultimately had

the most significant effect on deciding how to solve problems. Langlois's (2004) focus was on the superintendent's moral values when making decisions.

## Ethical Decision-Making Models

To examine the ethical perspectives of superintendents, Gross and Shapiro (2004) conducted a study in a reforming school district, examining which ethical frameworks, if any, were used by superintendents when handling problems. The four ethical frames considered were justice, care, critique, and the profession. The ethic of justice includes equality and equity, the ethic of care incorporates compassion, the ethic of critique questions barriers to fairness, and the ethic of the profession places the best interest of students at the heart of the education system (Gross & Shapiro, 2004). Using a qualitative design, Gross and Shapiro (2004) found all four ethical frames (justice, care, critique, and the profession) were used in handling problems at the faculty/administration and district level. The ethical frame of justice seemed to be used less frequently than the other frames, but it was used whenever the problem concerned a legal matter. Integrating the ethics of care, critique, and the profession in the decision-making process provided superintendents with new and rational ways to solve complicated issues (Gross & Shapiro, 2004). The authors found using multiple ethical perspectives fostered the ability to make difficult decisions, which lowered the level of turbulence in the district (Gross & Shapiro, 2004).

Feng (2011) found school leaders who had experience were more practical and inclined to use multiple ethical frames when making decisions. Feng (2011) studied those who were serving in leadership positions in Taiwan selected the ethical frame of virtue more often than care and critique, demonstrating the Confucian ideal of the superior person has a strong influence on Taiwanese school leaders. Lu (2014) found ethical leadership had a significant effect on

employee behavior. Employees led by leaders whom they considered moral exhibited more helping behavior. It is essential for superintendents to integrate ethical reasoning into problem solving and decision-making. Equally essential is for the leaders to have characteristics that suggest they are ethical and trustworthy (Feng, 2011; Gross & Shapiro, 2004; Lu, 2014).

## Ethics in Educational Leadership

Strike et al. (2005) discussed two central ethical principles related to educational leadership and decision-making. The first holds "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 "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).

According to Rebore (2013), "No issue has captured the interest and the imagination of the American public more than the subject of ethics, particularly about leadership in the public sector" (p. v.). With so many ethical incidents around the country (including leaders of state departments of education and school districts), people have been asking, "What is the relationship of ethics as it relates to educational leadership?" (Fowler, 2010, p. 1). Throughout the most recent two decades, a few scholars have endeavored to answer this question, and have authored books on the theme of morals and ethics in educational leadership.

According to Dufresne and McKenzie (2009), aspiring to be an ethical leader requires an individual route toward a commitment to the public and integrity to mutual trust. Chief executive officers at large organizations characterize leadership as merely an issue of leaders having high character and core values or being individuals of great character (Freeman & Stewart, 2006). Freeman and Stewart (2006) stated the importance of good character and core

values is essential.  However, the matter of ethical leadership is far more complicated and the stakes much higher.  It is critical for leaders to communicate a moral story, but ethical leaders must also believe and live the narrative through their actions and vision of the organization (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012).  Becoming an ethical leader is somewhat straightforward.  It requires a promise to look at personal conduct and values, and the ability and quality to acknowledge responsibility for individual actions and the effects those efforts have on the stakeholders (Freeman & Stewart, 2006).  Ethical leadership has been represented and determined in many different ways: trust, loyalty, and the ability to engage stakeholders to behave ethically (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan, & Prussia, 2013).

Kidder and Born (2002) understood educational leaders must make many daily judgments and decisions.  As such, they stated, "when dilemmas often hit 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 decision-making incorporates four components to be successful.  It must: "1) be rooted in care, 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).

In a speech given at the Rutgers Business School, Darcy (2010) confirmed the climate of institutions was uncertain regarding ethics.  In the address, the role of moral leadership, the requirement for a high ethical culture, the significance of trust, and the moral difficulties confronting future leadership were analyzed.  In a qualitative study, Darcy identified 66% of stakeholders question if ethics within leadership even is possible (p. 200).  This response is what the author called a *critical situation of trust* (p. 206).  Darcy's research concluded the substantial issue in institutions today is an absence of faith (p. 207).  Darcy stated no magic bullet exists

other than hard work, and a foundation of confidence, that is a characteristic of ethical leadership.

The reform of leadership started in the early 1990s with an emphasis on the requirement for moral authority to be more apparent, and researchers began to give careful attention to the need for this, especially in public and private associations (Yukl et al., 2013).  Brown and Trevino (2006) characterized ethical leadership as the showing of normatively appropriate behavior through individual activities and relationships, and the advancement of such conduct to supporters through two-way interaction, fortification, decision-making, and leadership. According to the authors, ethical leadership is composed of the most important aspects of individual and moral management (Brown & Trevino, 2006).

**Impact of Ethics**

All features of educational leadership are essential and not only include the priority of ethics in administration but also correlate to "being an ethical person who is also an educational leader, and the ethical practice of educational leadership" (Fowler, 2010, p. 3).  In addition to the behaviors of district- and school-level administration, other factors such as ethics of the profession and ethics of care and justice in educational leadership, how the community and stakeholders influence district policy, social norms, and what is considered to be acceptable behavior can play critical roles in educational leadership (Berghofer & Schwartz, 2007; Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Lama, 1999; Rebore, 2013; Strike, 2007).

The topic of ethical leadership has ignited research and articles regarding the effects of ethics on a leader.  Answering the question of how a person ethically leads an organization while producing positive results requires an understanding of what literature interprets as ethical leadership.  Yukl et al. (2013) summarized an ethical leader as one who encourages honesty and

reflects his or her core values and beliefs in his or her actions. However, the author acknowledged the field of ethical leadership has more than one meaning and includes different components. As a result, ethical leadership may be difficult to assess. Ethics comes down to a decision to influence others to do the right thing. Some authors have believed educational leaders need to strive for what ethics should be in leadership (Beckner, 2004; Rebore, 2013; Strike, 2007). This idea of developing and honing a personal approach to ethics aids in helping educational leaders build their ethical system, essentially like their code of conduct (Fowler, 2010).

A rigorous qualitative study completed by Plinio, Young, and Lavery (2010) found one of the most compelling issues facing institutions today is poor ethical behavior and nonexistent ethical leadership. Consequently, the authors noted trust in leadership is lessening. The authors also stated the intricacy of ethical leadership lives in the gray area of who is responsible when problems arise. Ethical mindfulness, recognizing the ethical parts of a given circumstance, is the initial phase of the ethical decision-making process. Brown and Trevino (2006) stated if a leader does not notice an issue as having ethical content, then the moral judgment process is not likely to be engaged.

**Ethical Practices of Leaders**

Sergiovanni (2007) believed a high level of leadership lies in the professional and moral beliefs of the individual. Scholars based ethical leadership on dignity and respect for others and self-determination within ethical boundaries of an organization (Starratt, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2007). Mayer et al. (2012) suggested leaders play a vital role in reducing adverse outcomes. Leaders set the ethical tone of an organization and are influential in encouraging moral behavior and reducing interpersonal conflict with their teams. Mayer et al. also stated not only do leaders

need to be trustworthy individuals, but they also need to go beyond and actively model ethical behaviors. The practice of educational leadership often involves duty and performance. Commitment to educational leadership encompasses the obligation to serve all involved stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, local officials, and community (Cranston et al., 2006). Within any organization, where a supervisor-staff relationship exists, power is universal. Educational leaders often have the "authority to employ, encourage, foster, censure, discipline, and terminate the employment of others" (Fowler, 2010, p. 4).

Once a leader develops moral maturity, he or she can encourage others to pursue an ethical living. Marcy, Gentry, and McKinnon (2008) frequently noted within institutions there is a fracture between what the leaders say versus the reality of their actions. During the authors' research, the disconnect was most common when leaders were faced with ethical dilemmas. In the research conducted by Cranston et al. (2006), the issues of trust, integrity, and honesty were essential findings. The authors stated there is a consensus that ethics is about relationships that require a decision about a given situation or event. Therefore, the authors noted an ethical leader has no differences between words and actions.

Cook (2012) examined the ethical practices of school leadership and how ethical decision-making influences their roles in leadership positions. All participants who responded indicated modeling ethical leadership is a priority in their place as principal (p. 170). According to Cook, the principal/leader's behavior serves as a guide for others in the school organization to embrace and practice. All responding participants in Cook's study practiced being a role model for ethical behavior to faculty and students. Cook concluded a role model for a public leadership position should always consider his or her actions and how they influence others. The core value of acting with others in mind is necessary to positively change the behavior of those who charge

the leader with the responsibility of making correct decisions. This practice, according to Northouse (2012), helped establish an atmosphere of trust and integrity, as the leader matches his or her behavior with his or her words. Ethical leaders, according to Northouse's data, demonstrate ethical principles through in-service training, straightforward conversations, setting high expectations, and most importantly by modeling behavior for faculty and students. Modeling ethical behavior in a leader is critical according to Northouse (2012).

Zhu, Norman, Peng, Riggio, and Sosik (2012) found ethical leadership has a calming effect on an organization, which leads to enhanced effectiveness and efficiency. Throughout society, state and local policymakers, educational scholars, and teachers have long acknowledged the importance of educational leadership (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010). Changing student behaviors and increasing student achievement begins with altering the practices of the staff and administrators in the school. Sometimes, this means the superintendent needs to have difficult conversations with building administrators and staff around the behaviors, expectations, and core values of the adults throughout the district (Starratt, 2012). Superintendents undoubtedly generate ethical expectations from their leadership style and decision-making, and help create initiatives for a better climate and culture for the district (Pardini, 2004).

## Conceptual Framework

Across public education, superintendents provide leadership to school systems and stakeholders including staff, students, parents, and the community. McDermott wrote, "The ethical challenges that school leaders confront are enormous; superintendents need to base decisions on both professional and personal standards" (pp. 1-2). As society continues to become more diverse across all areas, superintendents will need a framework that allows them to adapt quickly to new challenges (McDermott, 2010; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The multiple ethical paradigm (Nash, 2002; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) categorizing all moral discourse into one of three languages formed the conceptual framework for this study. In Shapiro and Stefkovich's theoretical framework, the multiple ethical paradigms of justice, care, critique, and the profession allow the superintendent to reflect on ethical principles before deciding, and these often become a part of the educational landscape that is encountered daily. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) explained these ethical paradigms provide tools for educational leaders. The authors believed the practical application of the multiple ethical paradigms has overarching themes for understanding complex dilemmas. Nash (2002) stated analysis and resolution of a professional ethical dilemma using three different kinds of moral language; background belief, character, and principal; can influence moral thinking. Limited new research has been conducted focusing on ethical decision-making in the educational setting. Because of this limitation, many authors agree more research is needed (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

## Summary

The review of the literature on ethical decision making of superintendents reveals an incomplete picture. Ethics is the study of good and evil. Today, ethics has become a critical part of all phases of public administration. Cranston et al. (2006) argued school superintendents' work differs from work in other fields because of the "changing and challenging operational environment in which schools operate" (p. 2). Robbins and Trabichet (2009) stated superintendents' capacity to lead could only happen "through an active pursuit of understanding cultural values and the exploration of one's own culture" (p. 56). How a superintendent manages and brings to conclusion ethical dilemmas is critical to the school district. While there has always been a need for ethics in leadership, the paradigm of leadership ethics has changed over

the past hundred years.  Leadership for the 21st century is predicated on moral and ethical values, but the challenge is to precisely define what moral and ethical principles are and how they should be accounted for and enforced (Ciulla, 2014).

The review of the literature made clear the need for this qualitative study. Superintendents hold a dominant position of influence over the district and their broader school communities.  They must address ethical dilemmas regularly, the outcomes of which can affect students, staff, parents, and communities in positive or negative ways.  According to Greenfield (2004), "Scholars can do much to advance the field's understanding of school leadership, organization, and community by conducting descriptive field-based studies on what leadership practices administrators and others in schools entail on a day-to-day basis" (p. 190). Superintendents need to have resources constructed to assist them in becoming thoughtful, skillful, self-reflective decision-makers.  Data gathered from Massachusetts superintendents were used to produce knowledge that could strengthen the theory and practice of ethical decision-making within the educational profession.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Superintendents make many decisions every day, ranging from easy and routine to complicated, made with careful and thoughtful deliberation. These decisions are grounded by standards that often go beyond the set of circumstances under consideration (Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013). The purpose of this study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose was to understand, as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession), if any, Massachusetts superintendents employed when making decisions.

This research study began with an overall question: How do superintendents make an ethical decision related to their work? This study explored the ethical frameworks and processes used by superintendents in making ethical decisions. In addition, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools?

2. Were the decisions superintendents made regarding the ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, which standard?

3. Which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, or the profession), if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?

This study used a phenomenological research method. The researcher used semi-structured interviews during the research. The study was descriptive and deductive, and it sought to

understand the phenomenon of Massachusetts superintendents. Merriam (2009) asserted, "qualitative research can help us to see how all of the parts work together to form a whole" (p. 6).

## Setting

Massachusetts public schools served over 953,000 children enrolled in 404 school districts in grades K-12 (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2017). There were 280 superintendents in Massachusetts. Massachusetts students were number one in the nation in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, number one in the world in reading, and number two in science on the Programme for International Student Assessment (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2017). The state collaborates with local school districts, superintendents, and educators to set guidelines for student learning and ensure educators have the appropriate license and that students learn in a standards-based environment. These semi-structured interviews took place in an agreed-upon location or through a secure Internet conference center with a scheduled date and time.

## Participants

According to Walker (1999), "The superintendent is the highest-ranking administrator in the district; he/she serves as the leader of the organization" (p. 4). Polkinghorne (as cited in Creswell, 2013) recommended researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. This researcher recruited via email (see Appendix A) the 8 superintendents in the study from the membership of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). The email to the participants contained information about the purpose of the study and an attached consent form (see Appendix C) sent out through a list serve to members of the MASS. The email had a three-week deadline to respond. To maximize the

response rate, the researcher sent out two emails (see Appendix B) one week apart through the

MASS list serve for participation in the study after the initial email.  Interested participants had

the option to contact the researcher through email response or telephone.  The researcher

communicated with each interested participant in a telephone conversation to schedule the semi-

structured interview time at a specific location or through a secure Internet conference center.

Vagle (2014) stated, "select research participants who have experienced the phenomenon under

investigation, whom you think will be able to provide a thorough and rich description of the

phenomenon" (p. 128).  The selection criteria included gender, length of tenure as a

superintendent, and willingness to be interviewed for 35 to 45 minutes and to be audiotaped.

## Participant Rights

The researcher communicated with each participant by initial email and then by

telephone to discuss the purpose of the study, to build rapport, and schedule interview times.

The researcher maintained the confidentiality of the data by disassociating participants'

identifying information from all data collected and assigned a fictitious name to every participant

to protect the superintendent's privacy.  All participants received an informed consent form,

which included a statement that participation was voluntary and detailed procedures for

withdrawal from the study at any time.  The superintendents received a transcript of the

interview to review for accuracy and clarifying comments by a given date.

## Data Collection Plan

The researcher communicated with each participant by email and telephone to discuss the

purpose of the study.  Each participant was sent an institutional review board Informed Consent

Letter (see Appendix C) confirming participation was voluntary, the interview was confidential,

and he or she agreed to participate.  The email/telephone call included the scheduled date and

time for the interview. The researcher used a narrative format of four vignettes (see Appendix D) to which each superintendent responded. The researcher asked the same four questions (Appendix D) at the end of each vignette. Interviews were recorded using an iPhone 7plus and were transcribed using Rev.com, a professional transcription service. ATLAS.ti8 coding software was used to identify themes. The researcher would have contacted the participant if additional information or clarity had been needed when the interviews were transcribed.

**The Vignettes**

Four vignettes were adapted from *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Hozien, 2012) .The researcher based the four vignettes on the multiple ethical paradigms framework of justice, care, critique, and the profession, and used them during the semi-structured interviews to explore the decision-making process of the superintendents. The four interview questions (see Appendix D) were written to be clear and concise but flexible to uncover the decision-making process.

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**Analysis**

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The purpose of this study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose was to understand, as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession), if any, were implemented by Massachusetts superintendents when making decisions. The researcher looked for salient themes, patterns, and categories in the superintendents' perceptions and practices of decision-making. This process required repeated listening of the recorded interview and repeated reading of the transcribed interviews. The researcher coded the

responses for similarities and differences in decision-making using the multiple ethical paradigm as the framework for the analysis. The researcher tried to understand whether responses were based on the ethical frameworks proposed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016).

The use of a phenomenological approach lent itself to understanding what superintendents' experience, and the framework they used when making decisions. The researcher used the modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis by Moustakas (1994) when examining phenomenological data in this study. This model first describes the experience of the phenomenon, and only regarding explicit events (Moustakas, 1994). When coding, the researcher identified themes and patterns, as well as structural descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To increase the strength of the study, the excerpts collected through coding were checked against the full transcript to ensure compatibility (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis in a phenomenological study moves from narrow to broader units of analysis on to detailed descriptions that summarize two elements "what the individuals experience" and "how they experience it" (Moustakas, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 79). The researcher paid attention to the language of the participants during their narratives using Nash's (2002) framework for categorizing moral language.

## Potential Limitations

A limitation is an unmanageable risk to the internal validity of a study (Creswell, 2015). As with any research study, possible limitations must be considered to maintain reliability, validity, and credibility (Merriam, 2009). Moustakas (1994) stated removing one's personal views is very difficult to achieve. The researcher addressed this with the first question and inserted dialogue only when asking a probing question. The researcher focused on listening versus engagement during the interview.

This study was dependent on the honesty of the participating superintendents and the predictability of the vignettes. The study was limited by the ability of the researcher to analyze the data with no bias. The researcher needed to design questions that allowed the superintendents to feel secure and protected when describing their beliefs in decision-making. Bias such as the possibility of the superintendents being acquainted with the researcher was also a limitation. The researcher for this investigation was a Massachusetts superintendent at the time of the study. As a current superintendent, the researcher had relationships with some of the superintendents through roundtables, professional development workshops, and membership in the superintendent organization. Due to the nature of these relationships, it was essential the researcher selected superintendents who were not closely acquainted with the researcher. One element that makes up a conceptual framework is personal interest (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). A personal interest is the researcher's beliefs about the topic and any biases. The research topic of this study, how superintendents make an ethical decision related to their work, came directly from the researcher's role as a superintendent in Massachusetts.

## Summary

A qualitative study provided a robust methodology for this research. The selection of the superintendents offered in-depth data about how the superintendents processed decisions and contributes to those concerned with ethical leadership in education. The study examined the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine if they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose was to understand, as described by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession), if any, were implemented by Massachusetts superintendents when making decisions.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Superintendents make decisions that affect people's lives and livelihoods. In making those decisions, they struggle to determine what is right and to act accordingly. This study explored the decision-making process of eight superintendents through vignettes and semi-structured interviews. As previously stated, the research questions guiding this study focused on the superintendent's process of decision-making using the four ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, and the profession). Specifically, this study sought to explore one overall question: How do superintendents in Massachusetts make ethical decisions in their work? This study sought to explore the principles and progression that influenced the decision-making of a sample of superintendents in Massachusetts. In addition, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools?

2. Were decisions superintendents made regarding ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, which standard?

3. Which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, or the profession), if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?

**Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

When conducting research using a phenomenological framework (Moustakas, 1994) the emphasis is on the experience of the phenomenon. The multiple ethical paradigm (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) formed the conceptual framework for this study. There has been limited research focusing on the decision-making process of superintendents using the multiple ethical

paradigm.  Superintendents' decisions should be based on well-grounded core values and policies not reaction under pressure.  The role of the superintendent and decision-making can create a strong district of learners.  Using the multiple ethical paradigm, superintendents are sensitive to the diverse needs of all students while evaluating ethical challenges when making educational decisions.  It is vital for superintendents to see leadership ethics as connected to decision-making (Maxcy, 2002, p. 7).  The multiple ethical paradigm of justice, care, critique, and the profession helped the superintendents examine their core values, how to deal with moral and ethical dilemmas, and understand the nature of the decision.  The findings in the study affirmed that superintendents relied on personal beliefs, policies, care, and professional development when discussing the moral dilemmas in the vignettes.

**Participant Information**

The purpose of the study was to examine the basis on which superintendents made decisions to determine whether they were using the four ethical frameworks of the multiple ethical paradigm to guide their decisions.  To explore the research questions guiding this study, eight superintendents were interviewed using a semi-structured setting through ZOOM, in-person, or a telephone call lasting from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Data collected from the interviews using the vignettes and four questions told very different stories and reactions but essentially fell under one of the four frameworks.  The vignettes included ethical struggles with student removal, religious accommodations, teacher discipline, and personal feelings for a professional standard.  The superintendents were identified through the MASS.  The superintendents were sent three emails (Appendix A and B) through the association seeking participants.  A total of eight superintendents were selected to participate.  The researcher communicated with each participant by email or telephone to discuss the purpose

of the study and to confirm participation and the consent form (Appendix C). Eight participants (i.e., four males and four females) agreed to participate and were assured confidentiality with respect to the collected data. An email confirming the date of the scheduled interview and the vignettes (Appendix D) was sent to each participant. Three days before the ZOOM call, a ZOOM invite was sent to the participant.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis began with the transcription of each interview using Rev.com. The transcriptions were then coded using ATLAS.ti8. The researcher examined each participant's transcripts and arranged a story with a beginning, middle, and end for each vignette. The participants gave detailed information for each vignette through their own experiences and relationships, but the underpinnings of the experience were part of its innate nature. The researcher attempted to perform the data analysis while consciously extricating the resolution from the underlying experiences, feelings, fears, and thoughts but it was an unnatural process. The researchers constructed what Moustakas referred to as "composite" descriptions (p. 121).

The research method was consistent with Moustakas' model, as some phenomenologists vary this approach by incorporating personal meaning for the experience (Moustakas, 1994). A data matrix was constructed of categories of meaning based on the context of the participants' comments (see Table 1). Harding (1985) focused on the process of thought through which "individuals come to interpret events as dilemmas" (p. 43). Using Harding's definition to be a dilemma, an argument must demand resolution in the course of daily life. Possibilities included examining the nature of the dilemma using this definition and identifying the nature of the dilemmas as conflicts of duties or moral sentiments. Although this research was not intended to

be a discourse analysis, the researcher did pay attention to the language of the participants used

in their narratives, using Nash's (2002) framework for categorizing moral language.

**Table 1.**  Framework comments by Superintendents

| Framework | Superintendents' Supporting Statements |
| --- | --- |
| Justice | There are certain policy that need to be adhere to; feels very strongly doesn't want to comply; standardized test have guidelines that must be followed; zero tolerance is a mandated policy; always consult legal on certain matters; it is my responsibility |
| Care | Need to have respect for different cultures; be sensitive to others; community awareness; concerns need to be heard; what is really going in with the student; caring cannot be confused with obligations; building relationships; understanding on how to build trusting relationships |
| Critique | Professional development is the key to successful teaching and learning; are there ample opportunities for teachers to engage in their own learning; differentiated instruction would help identify potential areas of conflict; Evaluate teachers' learning curve; special needs students should be given additional opportunities; accommodations for religious, culture beliefs |
| Profession | Need to follow district protocols; develop set of core values; influence of students; personal and professional; school committee and district need to develop plans to help teachers examine ethics and core values |

**Narrative Analysis**

Throughout the interview process and in analyzing the transcripts, the participants'

responses were similar to "telling stories" much more than asking questions and giving answers.

Mishler (1986) stated, "A general assumption of narrative analysis is that telling stories is one of

the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning" (p. 67).  Gee's assertion was,

"one of the primary ways, probably the primary way, human beings make sense of their

experience is by casting it in a narrative form" (as cited in Mishler, 1986, pp. 67-68).

Although the vignettes were followed by questions, the researcher found most all the

participants began to answer in a narrative format that included most of the data the researcher

was interested in obtaining.  The answers through the narrative responses were embedded in the

recounting of their experiences as superintendents.  More importantly, stepping back and

allowing the participants to narrate their responses allowed them, in turn, to focus on what they experienced to be an essential phenomenon without needing to limit themselves to the researcher's imposed framework.

Mishler (1986) identified problems inherent in narrative analysis, differentiating between "one story with related subplots or a series of different stories" (p. 73). The nature of these ethical dilemmas guided the participants to keep their narratives bounded to one story. In many of the interviews, the participants connected several parts to provide a cohesive and coherent account of the decision-making process. Some narratives were nonlinear in the sequence of events, but it was not difficult to reflect back and reconstruct the events of the vignettes based on the semantic cues of their accounts. Kidder (1995) stated:

> 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. 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. (p. 176)

**Moral Language in Superintendents**

In analyzing the participants' stories using Nash's three modes of moral discourse, 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). Participants one, three, six, and seven, who began in the third moral language category, became trilingual as they became more comfortable with the interview and as they progressed through each of the vignettes. They maneuvered from third to first to second through these languages with comfort and ease. It should be noted that two of the participants were retired and the other was the oldest

in age and had the most years of experience. Participant three started with the third language and then moved on to the first and then second language, "There is no policy around socializing after school. Me personally, I wouldn't engage in the activity but I would not judge people that do" (May 24, 2018).

Nash's second language of moral character, the attribute of being nonjudgmental, appeared as a desirable trait for two of the eight participants. Participants four and five exhibited the second category. They were vocal in stating they were nonjudgmental people. They believed they had the experience and knowledge as superintendents to be nonjudgmental district leaders. Some of the superintendents discussed the role of the school, community, principals, and their peers as shaping their growth as district leaders. Others spoke of a religious community and family members who influenced the way they made decisions and shaped their moral character.

Participants two and eight fell into Nash's third moral language. They consistently and repeatedly spoke of principles and universal laws and maxims. These superintendents spoke of inclusion of all students, mutual respect for others, and preparing students for the 21st century. When invoking moral principles to support ethical decision-making, these participants stated the principle, policy, and standard itself are what provided the ultimate authority. The policy was violated, "Mr. Mingle violated the tenants of our state procedures, and therefore invalidated the test. Therefore, I don't see any wiggle room in reporting it to the state, which requires us to do an investigation" (Participant two, May 24, 2018). It should be noted that the participants who fell into this third category were the superintendents who had worked in urban districts in Massachusetts.

Nash explained, "good ethical decision-making incorporates all three moral languages" (Nash, 2002, p. 147). He stated people are "multidimensional moral agents" (Nash, 2002, p. 147). According to participant seven, "Offer support, resources, and expertise to develop a strong school culture and climate for staff, parents, and most of all students. Transparency, process, and honest communication are essential" (May 31, 2018). "You transform into this greater individual that can just step back and realize this is a universal moral issue, not just one that affects Drew, Anthony or others" (Participant one, May 21, 2018).

**Vignette One: After-School Gathering**

Debra, a principal of a small elementary school, K-3, had implemented several team-building exercises to increase collaboration within the school culture. One Friday every month was a professional development day. After school, staff met at a local establishment for a social gathering. This has led to increased collaboration among staff and leadership. Mrs. Thompson, the most active parent at the school, showed the superintendent a picture on Facebook of the principal, Debra, drinking a shot of tequila. She was able to access Facebook because she was a "friend" of Mr. Raymond, who was at the restaurant. Debra was in the background of a picture of Mr. Raymond and his wife. Mrs. Thompson wanted her son out of the school and transferred to the other elementary school because she viewed this as irresponsible behavior showing a lack of self-control and an inability to manage a school (adapted from Hozien, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Most superintendents spoke of being under stricter guidelines than people working in other professions. "I would say the reputation and authority of the teacher, of the principal, reputation and the authority of the district are at stake" (Participant eight, June 6, 2018). "I think this is an opportunity to remind Mrs. Thompson that she does not run the system or the school"

(Participant six, May 29, 2018). "Number two is the issue of Facebook and how that goes viral these days. They saw it in a normal way that is not normal to see it. But those kinds of things, I think, come into play" (Participant three, May 24, 2018). Participant one commented "I mean, social media nowadays is going to be the death of us, because it always seems like they're one step ahead of us, but I think this really does get into the whole personal rights versus the role. . . . What is required in the role?" (May 21, 2018). The theme of social media was evident throughout many of the interviews. "I think one of the issues is it's the perception that you are involved in something like that. I think with social media today, that's also an issue. No matter where you are or what you do, there is somebody there that knows you" (Participant four, May 24, 2018).

Participant two addressed perception versus reality, "The issues are the use of technology and the public element and public responsibility that is ever increasing. It's the perception of morality and appropriate behavior, and it is the leadership actions at a quasi-professional activity" (May 24, 2018). Several of the participants mentioned professional judgment and decision-making. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) believed educational leaders needed time to develop and be given opportunities to create their own professional codes based on experiences and expectations (p. 23). As noted through these findings, not all participants responded with an ethical framework in mind when resolving the vignettes, but there was a strong correlation between their responses and the four ethical frameworks. The framework of profession was evident in all eight of the participants' responses to vignette one. In response to how to address the principal, participant four stated, "I understand the principal wants to build camaraderie. I might ask for maybe, if you wanted to do that, could you have not gone to a bar? Maybe your

judgment was a little off" (May 24, 2018). All of the participants offered ideas and solutions on how to help the principal explore other options to build a professional learning community.

The participants were asked about the request to remove the student from the classroom. All eight of the participants simply stated they would not submit to the parental demands and not remove the student from the classroom. Participant two explained, "I would speak with the parent who's offended and who wants her son out of the school and have her explain to me what she sees as irresponsible" (May 24, 2018). Participant five acknowledged the parent could "certainly feel the way she does about the fact the principal was drinking at a restaurant. But her having a decision beyond that is really up to her" (May 25, 2018). Participant two explained discretion is crucial in the decision-making process:

> In my opinion, this really isn't a question of right or wrong. It's a question of a continuum of responsibility and a continuum of good judgment, and you can always get better. The spiral I talk about is, I teach a four-part incident system where an incident happens, you respond to it, you then analyze the response to it, look back and then you create an incident plan for the next time that is an improvement over what you did this time, so it's always spiraling upwards to a better response. (May 24, 2018)

Participant one would meet with the parent and teacher to give the parent an opportunity to discuss her concerns but not act on the parent's request:

> Well, like anything else, it's not black and white here. I felt that the superintendent should meet with the mother, and try to really get at the heart of what's really bothering her because you don't wanna see the kid have to be transferred. On the other hand, it's very judgmental on the mother's part. You know? I would try to start with the mother first, depending on the relationship I had with her, and try to talk her off the ledge. Then,

if it's warranted . . . Again, like I said, it's tough because you don't know the relationships between . . . If this parent has some kind of a positive relationship with Mrs. Thompson, perhaps there could be a discussion between all three people.  They could just say, "Hey.  Let's just get to the meeting of the minds here."  You know?  (May 21, 2018)

The ethic of profession was a common theme in the interviews of the eight participants "As educational leaders develop their professional (and personal) codes, they consider various models, either focusing on specific paradigms or; optimally, integrating the ethics of justice, care, and critique" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 24).

### Vignette Two: 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.  Drew, eight years old, is a Buddhist student.  His teacher introduced the curriculum at the beginning of the school year by showing the students live bugs they would have to feed the class lizard.  Each student was to have a week of feeding the lizard.  Drew was troubled and hurt by this and after three weeks of witnessing the students feed the live bugs to the lizard, he set the bugs and the lizard free at recess.  Drew was sent to the principal's office.  The principal was concerned about respecting diversity in her school, but usually, such an offense could merit suspension.  The principal tried to manage the situation, but it landed in the superintendent's office (adapted from Hozien, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

All of the superintendents stated the teacher should have never let the lesson go this far without communicating the lesson to the Buddhist student.  They all stated the teacher should have known the make-up of the class, family values, and traditions of the students.  The ethic of care was six superintendents' resolution to this vignette.  The only other vignette in which ethic

of care was referred to was the last vignette on zero tolerance.  Participant one spoke to the fact

that the teacher should have known of this student's Buddhist beliefs.  "People should know

what some of the religious beliefs are of some children in their classroom.  I think, as the

superintendent, there's probably some room here for cultural awareness that probably needs to

enter its way in there" (May 21, 2018).  Participant two would have involved the family at the

start of the discussion:

> I also probably would have counseled the teacher to call the parents, to explain what they
>
> were doing scientifically and to permit the student to either not be involved or leave the
>
> room even for short periods of time if necessary, but that again would be a discussion, not
>
> a dictum.  (May 24, 2018)

Participant four mentioned caring and the child's beliefs:

> As a superintendent, I'm gonna kick it back to the principal.  I'm gonna say, "Let's have
>
> a meeting" if they needed me to facilitate.  The first issue is.  We're harming this young
>
> man.  If he sees them eating bugs and it disturbs him so much, he could have been given
>
> an alternative assignment or possibly, not have to sit and watch that.  Was he wrong to let
>
> the lizard free and let the bugs free?  Probably, but, if he really believes in his values that
>
> strongly, then I couldn't give this child a punishment.  (May 24, 2018)

Participants five and eight used the language of the ethic of care when they referenced how they

would help the teacher through this experience.  The researcher found it interesting that while the

vignette addressed the child and his religion most of the superintendents went on to describe how

they would help the teacher to learn and grow, "Well, I think, first of all, I would hope the

teacher would gain some skills in terms of looking for and being attentive to different kind of

cultural and religious responses" (Participant five, May 25, 2018). Participant eight stated,

"Does the teacher know what Buddhism is?" (June 6, 2018).

Participant seven used the ethic of justice in some of the response to the vignette:

> Looking at, again, school committee policies, board of health guidelines, DPH guidelines,
> are the necessary precautions in place? Taking the focus off religion, and putting it as
> science safety. What's in place? Where are we getting these bugs from? Do we have
> appropriate safety and cleaning procedures and protocols in place? And again, I went
> back to developmentally appropriate practice. That kind of crossed the line for me.
> (May 31, 2018)

Participant two also referred to the ethic of justice in summarizing the chain of command:

> I have a chain of command I use that parents have to follow, and if it's appropriate for the
> superintendent to get involved, I would get involved, but if it's appropriate for me to
> speak to the parent and tell them they have to go back to the principal because it's
> principal and the teacher's decision. (May 24, 2018)

Participant three was interested in issues of equity with other students when resolving the issues

in the vignette. "However, the issues that come up are all the other parents see what he did and

maybe they may not have the same beliefs or understanding. We need to explain to anybody that

is was the child's belief" (May 24, 2018). Participant five believed the whole notion of cultural

responsiveness was a significant part of the teaching profession. "And in this case, this would be

Buddhist framework, and find ways to both support that and respect that" (May 25, 2018).

Participant eight spoke about the ethic of profession and said all teachers should follow

the standards and curriculum; "I found that I was more concerned with the actions of the teacher

and is the teacher new to the profession and needs to be coached" (June 6, 2018). "All manner

of trying to respect a religion and so I would explore with the principal and the teacher, what other options and opportunities might be out there, to have the same experience" (Participant seven, May 31, 2018). Participants one, five, and eight also spoke about the ethic of profession and the need to identify and support the teacher, school, student, and family. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) stated, "professional codes of ethics serve as guideposts from the profession, giving statements about its image and character" (p. 22). Participant one explained the need for the "teacher to know themselves and their decision to go forward with the project" (May 21, 2018). Participant five (May 25, 2018) recognized "the disconnect with the teacher and students and questioned the values of the teacher and the curriculum."

Two participants mentioned the ethic of justice and applied laws and concerns for safety and policies when addressing the situation. All participants were well aware of the religious status of the student and the role it played in the education of the child. Three of the participants cited the ethic of critique in the importance of revising the curriculum to meet the needs of all students. All of the participants understood the action of the student and empathized with the action taken and all resolved the dilemma in the same way: address the understanding of cultural awareness with the teacher and providing alternative ways to satisfy the curriculum standard. Several of the participants did acknowledge, "in these vignettes, we lack diversity" and spoke at length about what that means to the future of the students in their districts (Participants one, two, four, five, and seven).

**Vignette Three: Deaf Education**

Mr. Mingle, an American Sign Language (ASL) teacher, was assigned to sign the questions and answer choices on a mandated test verbatim as they were written in English. Three months later, the test results arrived with the deaf students doing significantly better in Mr.

Mangles' class than in the other deaf education class. Mr. Mingle was called to the superintendent's office where he explained that he did sign "conceptually accurate" ASL instead of "verbatim" English word order because he stated that signing correct ASL gives students a clearer picture of the questions and leveled the playing field for deaf students. He finally stated to the superintendent, "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" (adapted from Hozien, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The three ethical frameworks of justice, critique, and the profession were used by the participants when they solved this dilemma. The ethic of care was not used by any of the eight participants in this study. Four participants mentioned the ethic of justice and profession as being tied together. One of the participants realized through the ethic of critique "equity for all students" and that "would make it okay for deaf students" (Participant two, May 24, 2018). The participants who spoke about the ethic of the profession, and the four who explained the vignette through the ethic of justice and profession, continually spoke about the seriousness of the dilemma. They elaborated about the difficulty the situation represented and the possible consequences that might follow. Participant two was very clear "Mr. Mingle violated the tenants of our state's procedures, and therefore, invalidated the student test. Therefore, I don't see any wiggle room in reporting it to the state, which requires us to do an investigation" (May 24, 2018).

The ethic of justice was brought up by the eight participants. "I think this is a case of the sign language teacher not following the rules of the test, and it's important to follow the rules even though we may not necessarily agree with them" (Participant three, May 24, 2018). Participant four understood the passion of the teacher but stated:

I understand his passion, the moral obligation to fight for the rights of deaf students, but I also think we have to have the same expectations of them and follow the state laws in testing that everybody else has. We can't feel bad for kids. We can't take other liberties to do it. (May 24, 2018)

Participant five wanted to know about any accommodations for the student and if the student had an individualized education plan. "Does the student have an IEP? Does the IEP address and flexibility of answering or giving conceptual accurate ASLs instead of verbatim English" (May 25, 2018). Participant six stated Mr. Mingle broke the testing regulations:

He felt he was helping his students get a "fair shake." But in doing so he probably embellished their answers, or at least put them into a format that would result in a higher grade. In taking the steps he felt were appropriate to help his students; he put all the other hearing-impaired students, not just in his school, but throughout the state, at a disadvantage. He has also put the school at risk of having its results invalidated. The superintendent has very little latitude here. The situation must be reported to the proper authorities. Mr. Mingle has to be brought in and given a hearing, with his union representative if he wished. The superintendent should take whatever steps are called for, following progressive discipline. (May 29, 2018)

Some participants stated they understood the teacher's actions but what he did was clearly in violation of state testing protocol (Participants one, three, four, five, six, and eight). "There has to be some progressive discipline" stated participant eight (June 6, 2018). "While Mr. Mingle cared and may think he is an advocate, there are other students out there who deserve the same type of advocacy" (Participant eight, June 6, 2018).

All of the participants explained the teacher should be reprimanded in some sort of way. Participant five stated in today's educational setting there is high-stakes testing and the teacher needs to understand the actions of his behavior, "I think I would have to give the teacher a warning. And make sure he understands the consequences of his action. There would be some kind of reprimand and warning about future actions" (May 25, 2018). Participant one emphatically stated, "We have to prepare all our students for rigorous testing, and Mr. Mingle is not helping our students achieve this benchmark" (May 21, 2018).

## Vignette Four: Zero Tolerance

The district has a zero-tolerance policy on bringing weapons to school. Anthony, a high school sophomore who volunteered at the central office after school, approached the superintendent in the hallway and said, "You have to suspend me from school." Anthony proceeded to explain that he had a knife in his backpack because he was at Boy Scouts late the night before and forgot to remove it from his backpack when he came to school that morning (adapted from Hozien, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The initial reaction from all the participants when they read the dilemma was "I had an encounter like this." All the participants specifically stated the student should go unpunished. Participant one stated while the student clearly knew the consequences, it just did not add up:

> He clearly knows the consequences of it. So, in that kind of a situation, I would probably sit down with him, and say, "Why don't you give me the knife, just so I have it? I'm gonna have to call your parents. When they pick you up, let's just chat about it with your parents." (May 21, 2018)

Participant two related a personal account of a similar situation and how it was handled:

I had a sixth-grade student bring one of the biggest knives I've ever seen at a school. The

blade had to be 10 inches long, to school.  Her mother sent her to school to cut her

birthday cake.  So, I called the parent in.  Parent came in, kid was upset, teacher was

furious, and I sent the kid home with no paperwork for the day to just calm everything.  I

actually castigated the parent.  I said, "I don't know what you were thinking, but you sent

your kid to school with a knife, a big giant knife."  (May 24, 2018)

The ethic of profession was mentioned often.  However, it was not the solution to the dilemma.

The participants explained that many cases similar to this one presented to them as

superintendents should be taken on an individual basis.  All of the participants used the ethic of

justice when discussing the vignette, and five of the participants used the ethic of the profession

to support their actions.  According to participant two, "The core value is safety.  When Anthony

goes to the superintendent and says 'I forgot my knife,' he, in fact, is demonstrating the core

value better than a punishment" (May 24, 2018).  Participant three who has been in the same

district for 44 years explained it perfectly:

I'm not sure that the zero-tolerance policy really applies to someone who makes a

mistake and has a knife because he forgot it.  If the superintendent is convinced that he's

absolutely honorable and so forth, I don't see any reason to suspend the student.  I don't

have very many occasions where a student comes and says "You need to suspend me or

expel me or whatever it is."  That's not the way it works.  Generally, works is that

someone discovers a weapon, one way or another, and in this day in age, not to belittle

the seriousness of it or anything like that, but I certainly would explain to this student that

this is something that you've gotta be careful of because this could go viral.  But, in the

meantime, I don't think it's worth a suspension. It's certainly worth a talk. It's worth a

warning. It's worth a "Check your backpack" when you come in. (May 24, 2018)

Participant six stated, "these policies were more trouble than they were worth" (May 29, 2018)

while participant seven "has never been a big fan of the zero-tolerance policy" (May 31, 2018).

Participant eight has a bias with the policy. "I hate zero-tolerance policy. As soon as I saw that

language, I was like 'oh man.' It just doesn't allow for that opportunity of saying let's consider

context, let's consider scenario" (June 6, 2018). Several of the participants saw this as a learning

opportunity and applauded the student for coming forward. Participant one would thank the

student for his honesty "and use the opportunity to reinforce the importance of, "You know why

that concerns people when you have that here?" (May 21, 2018). Participant two spoke of

today's world, "We are beginning to lose the sight of something that can be perceived as a threat

or something that poses a threat, and we've lost the line." (May 24, 2018).

Participant five opted to suspend using the zero-tolerance policy as the basis:

> Well, I think the justice part of this is zero-tolerance policy. It doesn't say what weapons
>
> you can and can't bring. It doesn't specify that. And the pocket knife is in fact seen as a
>
> weapon; it probably is defined that way. I want to make sure there weren't some missing
>
> definitions in the zero-tolerance policy. So, I, in fact, think the student does need to be
>
> suspended if that's the typical repercussion of having a weapon in school. (May 25,
>
> 2018)

The participants were all aware of the zero-tolerance policy. Most wanted it changed and

explained why there needed to be more information when these situations occur. They all

engaged the student and the parents but did not have the student suspended.

The ethic of care was addressed by two of the participants. The care was for the student and the ability to come forward with the issue. One participant questioned "why" and if there was something else going on (Participant four, May 24, 2018). Participant seven (May 31, 2018) discussed the impact on the district and "need to notify parents to dispel any rumors." Beck (1994) stressed, "it is essential for educational leaders to move away from top-down, hierarchical model for making moral and other decisions and, instead, turn to a leadership style that emphasizes relationships and connections" (p. 85).

## Summary

**Table 2.** Scoring of Vignettes

| Vignette | Justice | Care | Critique | Profession |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| After-school drinking | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| Buddhism and animals | 2 | 6 | 3 | 4 |
| Deaf education | 8 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Zero tolerance | 8 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Total | 18 | 8 | 4 | 31 |

Analyzing the data in Table 2, it was evident the ethic of profession was manifest when Massachusetts superintendents had to make decisions. When reflecting upon the vignette, most superintendents used a multiple paradigm approach to solving the dilemmas. By utilized the different paradigms, the superintendents became aware of the perspectives they tend to use most often when solving ethical issues. In vignette one; all eight superintendents used an ethical framework when discussing the drinking and Facebook. Six superintendents used the ethic or care analyzing vignette two while four used the ethic of the profession with the ethic of care when discussing Drew, the Buddhist student who freed the animals. Two superintendents used the ethic of justice when discussing the activity in the classroom in regard to safety protocols and standards. Three of the eight superintendents discussed the core values and professional codes

when referencing the teacher in vignette two. The ethic of justice prevailed in vignette three in relation to the proctor and the standardized test. The superintendents discussed the vignette using language directly associated with the ethic of justice, "fair, "right," "law," "protocol." Five superintendents referred to vignette three in terms of the ethic of profession. Only one superintendent referred to social inequity and used the ethic of critique. Not one superintendent used the ethic of care in elaborating on the rights of the deaf students and mandated assessments. The closest to ethic of care were statements concerning the other deaf children and the burden it placed on them.

In the last vignette, eight superintendents were overwhelmingly in the framework of the ethic of justice with some overlapping with the ethic of profession. Five used the ethic of profession to justify their actions with the zero-tolerance policy, and two used the ethic of care. The ethic of critique was not used by any of the superintendents when they discussed the student who honestly turned himself in because he was carrying a knife. Most superintendents took the time to discuss the flaws in the policy but never defied it in the true meaning of the ethic of critique.

According to Carter and Cunningham (1997), "the key to being a successful and responsive superintendent, then are open communication, integrity, hard work, positive direction, core values, sound judgment, and effective decision-making" (p. 36). The 8 superintendents all had more than 10 years of administrative experience and brought up concrete examples from their past to collaborate their rationale for decision-making. Several discussed decision-making in terms of a daily routine, actively listening, and knowing the political landscape. They also spoke of difficult decisions and guilt when deciding and, in the end, needing to face the

community when the decision was made. "We all make bad decisions and hopefully learn from them" (Participant one, May 21, 2018).

Many of the superintendents either directly or indirectly used the ethic of care when they discussed the consequences of their decisions and actions. The ethic of care asked the individual to consider:

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? And 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, 2016, p. 18)

The notion was that this paradigm asked the individuals to grapple as these superintendents did with moral imperatives. The superintendents always came back to reflect upon their decision-making using factors such as the accountability toward all students. They always reflected on "are the decisions we made today in the best interest of all students" (Participant two, May 24, 2018). "They stated sometimes acting in the best interest of all students is not the most popular" (Participant five, May 25, 2018). Participant seven summed it up in response to vignette one:

Apologizing for the lapse in judgment is always a good start. Most of the parents will probably fall in line; you will have some others who probably won't. The thing I would be pretty resolute in is not transferring Mrs. Thompson's kid. I don't see the child isn't involved; there isn't a safety issue, so that would be my line in the sand. I would make that clear, and I would make sure I got the school committee lined up to say, you know what? My decision, not yours, because, you don't need them off chirping. (May 29, 2018)

When making decisions, the superintendents clearly followed the best interest model (Stefkovich, 2007) in which they used "self-reflection, open-mindedness, and an understanding that making ethically sound decisions profoundly influences others' lives" (p. 21). As they discussed their resolutions to the dilemmas, the superintendents used self-reflection in their narrative and consistently referred back to their own experiences using phrases such as "during my tenure" or "a similar situation" (participants two, three, five, six, seven, and eight). Although they had great respect for all parties involved in the dilemma, they continued to refer back to their responsibilities as a superintendent. "My role is to ensure all students have the necessary tools to succeed" (Participant two, May 24, 2018). They also used vocabulary around "safety" "security" and "protection" (participants four, five, and eight). They also made use of "coaching" "teachable moments" and "respect and responsibility" (participants one, two, three, five, and seven).

The superintendents verbalized some occasional pressure from others when making decisions. When asked about providing justifications for decisions, some differences were noted. Some superintendents though they should, others thought they should not need to give justifications for their decisions based on their position, experience, and credentials. The third group thought that certain decisions, such as those affecting people, demand a justification.

> Educational leaders need a strategy to aid them in coming to an appropriate decision on how to act in a given tension situation. An understanding of ethics can help leaders apply systematic thinking about values and ethics and their application to real situations. They need to ensure that their systematic thinking reflects their core values and ethical standards or viewpoints. (Duignan, 2012, p. 106)

**Multiple Ethical Paradigms**

The superintendents all favored the ethical frameworks of justice and the profession to solve difficult decisions. This theme became evident as the researcher coded the superintendents' responses to the vignette questions. All four frameworks of justice, care, critique, and the profession emerged but not for every decision. "Dilemmas in educational institutions can be complicated and may naturally lead to the use of two or more paradigms to solve problems" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, p. 7). From the ethics of justice, all of the superintendents spoke at length about treating students and staff equally, actions and consequences, and that the goal of education is to develop students for the real world. They used phrases such as "doing what is right," "good for the community," "standards," "policy," and "law" to define decisions using the ethic of justice. The response from participant five was, "There's a mandated test. You have to follow it. We understand your passion. But, there is nothing, that is cut and dry" (May 25, 2018).

When it came to the ethics of justice, most superintendents spoke in this framework. "We have a professional standard, and we need to adhere to it" (Participant five, May 25, 2018). Many of the superintendents quoted district and federal guidelines and curriculum standards. For major decisions that would affect the district and community, most superintendents mentioned they would contact the school committee at some point. Carter and Cunningham (1997) found, "Superintendents who have a tenure of 12 years or more in a district identify open communication with school board and community as one of the most important leadership attributes" (p. 36).

From the standpoint of the ethic of care, several of the superintendents discussed the significance of open communication, transparency, and trust. In response to vignette one,

participant four stated, "If the principal needs help, then I would help them, but I think if you want to respect diversity, then you have to educate other parents, as well" (May 24, 2018). Several of the superintendents discussed creating a community that meets the needs of all learners and the importance of building a community, "We need to create a community of caring students and adults" (Participant seven, May 31, 2018).

From the ethic of critique, some of the superintendents expressed concern over the lack of diversity, as noted in vignettes two and three. In response to vignette two and the religious beliefs of a Buddhist student, participant seven stated, "Our students need exposure to different concepts and other ways of doing things" (May 31, 2018). The ethic of the profession was woven through all of the decision-making. In response to vignette one and the Facebook picture, many of the participants had expressed a need to work with the principal. Participant one expressed, "I do think that the principal does need to understand that, unfortunately, these jobs are not, go in, work during the school day, and then go home" (May 21, 2018). According to Shapiro and Stefkovich:

> The ethic of the profession would ask questions related to justice, critique, and care
> posed by the other ethical paradigms but would go beyond these questions to inquire:
> What would the profession expect me to do? What does the community expect me to
> do? And what should I do based on the best interests of the students, who may be
> diverse in their composition and their needs? (p. 27)

A positive district culture has four dimensions: values, norms, expectations, and sanctions. When superintendents enable the four ethical frameworks of justice, care, critique, and the profession their decision-making benefits all students.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study contributed to the research on ethical decision-making practices of Massachusetts superintendents. It provided an in-depth examination of a group of educational leaders and their decision-making practices. Multiple ethical paradigm theory was analyzed relative to the results of this study based on the questions guiding the study. This study explored the decision-making of eight superintendents using four vignettes and the same questions for each one. Specifically, this study sought to examine the superintendents' perceptions of how their decision-making affected their leadership in ethical situations. At the core of leadership and leadership styles was decision-making. Moral issues are what constitutes just or fair treatment of one another and what rights we each have. According to Strike, Haller, and Soltis (2005), "Human beings are moral agents. They are responsible for their choices, and they have a duty to make choices in a morally responsible way" (p. 6).

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 (2016) stated, "Today, with the complexity of situations and cultures, it seems more important than ever for educational leaders to think more broadly and go beyond "self" in an attempt to understand others" (p. 7). Understanding how a superintendent leads necessitates an understanding of how he or she solves ethical dilemmas, often associated with paradoxes within educational administration. The overarching research question in this study was: How do superintendents in Massachusetts make ethical decisions in their work? Furthermore, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools?

2. Were decisions superintendents made regarding ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, which standard?

3. Which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, or the profession), if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?

The findings from this phenomenological research study of eight superintendents and their perceptions of their decision-making could not be generalized to other superintendents; however, the results could add to the existing knowledge base on educational leaders and decision-making. The responses to this study's research questions could provide insight for other researchers about areas needing further investigation. The answers to this study's research questions depict one researcher's assessment of decision-making that occurred in eight Massachusetts superintendents.

As stated in Chapter 3, this study utilized a qualitative methodology to explore the guiding research questions. The study used a phenomenological method based on the modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis by Moustakas (1994). Nash's (2002) framework for categorizing moral language was utilized during the data analysis of the superintendents' interviews. Chapter 4 provided an overview of the decision-making these superintendents used when solving the four vignettes. Every attempt was made to explore each of the research questions through the semi-structured interviews with the superintendents. The tools used for collecting data were four vignettes, corresponding questions, and semi-structured interviews.

The researcher solicited interested superintendents through the MASS; all the superintendents were contacted by the researcher through email and telephone calls. If the superintendent was willing to participate in the study, the researcher sent out written notification of the interview time, method, and permission to conduct the research. The interviews ranged in time from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews utilized a semi-structured format with open-ended questions mapped to the research questions guiding the study. The format of the interviews was through a ZOOM call, in-person, or a telephone call. The researcher recorded and transcribed through a transcription service each of the interviews with permission from the superintendents. While conducting the interviews, the researcher made observations about the language of the participants during their narratives.

## Summary

This study focused specifically on the practice of ethical decision making of Massachusetts superintendents. Since the study was exploratory and descriptive, qualitative methods were used. The qualitative study addressed the attitudes, values, and processes which influenced the decision-making of superintendents. The investigator relied on a semi- structured, in-depth interview as the primary method of data collection. The superintendents were identified using the list serve of the MASS. Eight superintendents expressed interest in participating in the research, both males and females with more than 10 years of experience.

The researcher spent time at the beginning of the interview to explain the purpose of the study and to answer any questions. This time was also used to establish a rapport with the superintendents talking in general about education and the role of the superintendent. During this time, it became evident to the researcher that each of the participants really enjoyed his or her work as an educational leader. Although each superintendent talked about the challenges of

educational leadership, they all were proud of their districts. They also expressed a high level of commitment to the communities they served.

As the interviews proceeded, the researcher continued to code the data. As this work was completed, different themes began to emerge from the data. As the superintendents spoke about their personal experiences, it was evident that the superintendents valued the community and the schools in their district. These values to the community and the district affected the superintendents' abilities to lead and make difficult decisions. All of the superintendents spoke about the importance of "fit" and spoke about feeling comfortable in their role as the district leader. Carter and Cunningham (1997) stated:

> The superintendency requires "fire in the belly," physical stamina, leadership skills, vision, and a strong desire to use one's power to improve the lives of children. It calls for good judgment, social-political acuity, and willingness to subordinate one's private goals to those of the community. The superintendent can have a profound impact on community life for generations to come. (p. 4)

The superintendents' commitment to their community and district influenced many decisions they made throughout the course of this research study.

The superintendents stated they made numerous decisions every day. Some decisions were part of the daily routine and included ones concerning personnel, budget, facilities, curriculum, and community impact. Some were periodic such as those concerned with teacher evaluation, policy, and strategic planning. Most of the superintendents reported the decisions that had an effect on people were the most difficult to make, as in all of the vignettes. Six of the eight superintendents defined ethical decision making as doing what was right. Another superintendent, while not using those words, described ethical decision making as a conscience-

directed activity that hits home at one's core values, "Educational leadership must be situated within the context of all other human activities because it is impossible to isolate the responsibilities of leadership from other human responsibilities" (Rebore, 2013, p. 21). The researcher found no difference in the articulated understanding of ethical decision making by male and female superintendents. As the discussions about ethical decision making continued, all of the superintendents discussed ethical decision making as an imperative.

The superintendents 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 superintendents cited their respective experience, education, upbringing, values, and beliefs. Further, they maintained the standards did not change with the circumstances or context. They suggested the application of those standards varied according to the context.

Most of the superintendents admitted they had observed unethical practices. Most of them talked in terms of several observations involving school board members, community engagement, parents, teachers, and students. The unethical practices included incidents of unprofessional behavior, lack of respect, and treating some people differently than others. In addition, the superintendents reported they all faced ethical dilemmas. Most of the superintendents believed 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 unexpected outcomes. Qualitative research alone cannot provide sufficient evidence to make broad generalizations for all superintendents. Further, the decision-making of superintendents could not be separated from their moral convictions, values, and beliefs (Beck, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981;

Sergiovanni, 2007; Starrat, 2017; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).  The superintendents applied their own personal beliefs, and ethical standards to decisions and the superintendents affirmed they did.  Participant three spoke about his or her own background, "I don't personally think it is a good thing to be drinking or even to go into a package store, if you will, in the community where you work" (May 24, 2018).  The superintendents spoke of how their personal beliefs continually influenced their behavior.  This finding was consistent with the literature.  Many researchers and authors concluded making ethical decisions was a daunting task and factors such as the educational leaders' own feelings, or past experiences could be quite useful.  Duignan (2012) stated, "Feelings can easily prejudice judgment, but they can also be a good, almost instinctive, guide to right and wrong" (p. 114).

All the superintendents stated whenever possible to include all stakeholders, teachers, and students.  Active listening was articulated by several of the superintendents as an essential first step to decision-making and could be interpreted as something that corresponded with problem identification.  According to Shapiro and Gross (as cited in Beck, 1994) "it is essential for educational leaders to move away from top-down, hierarchical model for making moral and other decisions and instead turn to a leadership style that emphasizes relationships and connections" (p. 29).  The superintendents 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 could be learned.

Although an ethical component was not present in some of the decision-making of each of the superintendents, they used an ethical framework whether directly or indirectly through the narrative to resolve the dilemmas.  The researcher did not guide them to use an ethical framework at any point and tried to remain neutral at all times.  This finding was expected based

on what had already been established about administrative decision-making (Ciulla, 1988; Foster, 1986; Hitt, 1990) concluded educational leaders were confronted by ethical issues on a daily basis. Managing daily issues requires superintendents to uphold principles of honesty and integrity. Many authors studied the topic of ethics among educational administrators, especially in the areas leadership, decision-making, and moral purpose (Duignan, 2012; Fullan, 2003; Kidder & Born, 2002; Northouse, 2014; Walker, 1999). The researchers concluded ethics are a concern for those who practice educational administration. Superintendents are under strong external and internal pressures that tend to control their day-to-day activities, and leave them with limited meaning, moral purpose, and passion for their work, "In recent times a strong emphasis on ethics and moral purpose, as well as the recognition that leadership is a value-based activity has emerged in educational leadership" (Duignan, 2012, p. 9).

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

As the researcher coded and explored the data, one unexpected outcome was evident. The superintendents 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 superintendents' responses across the four ethical paradigms, it became clear to the researcher that most of the superintendents' responses and examples they provided consistently contradicted their earlier stated focus on rules and procedures. Whatever the reason, the superintendents 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 adherence to rules.

During the final member check procedure, the researcher asked the superintendents 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 and that many of them used the ethics of the profession and justice in framing their resolutions. Several spoke to the fact that they were caring, they cared about the well-being not only of the student, but of the community, and therefore, that was the reason for following protocol. Others stated professionals are trained to set aside personal feelings and make decisions based on what is right. Beckner (2004) stated, "there is a difference between actions that are obviously right or wrong and those that may be reasonably placed in a gray area" (p. 89). As suggested by Kidder (1995), "these will be differentiated as either "moral temptations" or moral dilemmas" (p. 17).

## Overview of Research Questions

The research began with one overarching question: "How do superintendents in Massachusetts make ethical decisions in their work?" In addition, three supporting questions were part of this study. In this section, each of the supporting questions was answered followed by the answer to the focus question.

### Ethical Factors

What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools? The findings in vignettes one and two found all superintendents used an ethical framework to solve the dilemma. In vignettes three and four, many of the superintendents spoke of the ethics of justice and the profession concurrently. The ethic of critique was used the least in answering and justifying the resolution to the dilemmas presented to the superintendents.

In trying to understand how ethical factors drive the decision-making process, participant two explained there should be no difference in caring for the district and caring for the staff and students (May 24, 2018). The participant's answer explained how consistency is a good trait. In resolving vignette three, about the deaf student and high-stakes testing, participant two further explained caring is probably not synonymous because of the nature of the test.

An essential ethical factor is working toward the best interests of the students. All of the superintendents spoke about focusing on the students and providing them with what was needed to succeed. They explained the needs of the students is a priority in their districts and education, "Superintendents must develop approaches that create support mechanisms encouraging conversations, collaboration, and goal setting to support educational improvements for all students" (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 78). Stefkovich further explained, "the student's best

interests are at the center of the ethic of the profession" (2014, p. 21). This principle was totally aligned with the findings of this study. Most of the superintendents used the ethic of the profession when resolving the ethical dilemmas.

**Ethical Standards**

The next question was: "Were the decisions superintendents made regarding ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard?" If so, which standard? The superintendents identified experiences, institutions, and people who had shaped their ethical thinking. They included parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, family members, and religious clergy among those who were most important. A few included their educational degrees; most of them thought ethics could be learned. The research indicated many believed the limited training in ethical decision making was a disadvantage for educational leaders (Beck, 1996; Fenstermaker, 1996; Nash, 2002). The findings of this study suggested exposure to ethical decision-making must begin early in an educational leader's career. These superintendents 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. Having a standard does not necessarily lead to ethical behavior.

While some superintendents took a formal college course, most stated and believed it would be helpful. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) described ethics as a process:

We have come to see the teaching of ethics as an ever-evolving process on the part of the profession as well as the students. We believe that conscious reflection about our pedagogy should enable us to be more honest with those we teach. (p. 226)

Most of the superintendents 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

Shapiro and Stefkovich, (2016) and Strike, Haller, and Soltis, (2005). Nash (2002) also emphasized the use of models to analyze the decisions of educational administrators. The superintendents who participated in this study favored vignettes and case studies as opposed to theoretical concepts. This proved consistent as they emphasized their personal experiences.

Participant seven explained his or her first action in the superintendent's role was to spend some time thinking about their core values and beliefs, "I want to examine my belief system and if it is aligned to the district's goals, community, and educational direction" (May 31, 2018).

**Four Ethical Frameworks**

The third question focused on the use of the four ethical frameworks, "Which ethical frameworks, justice, care, critique, or the profession, if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?" The majority of the superintendents used the context of the ethic of justice and the ethic of the profession to frame their responses. They had a pattern of combining the two together when resolving the conflicts. It is not that the superintendents used the other ethical frameworks; however, it was not the focus of the resolution to the vignettes provided. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) explained, "using four different ethical paradigms would hopefully provide in-depth and detailed knowledge and sensitivities regarding the dilemma" (p. 32).

The ethics of critique and care were used the least in the superintendents' analysis of the four vignettes. The ethic of the profession was used most followed by the ethic of justice. Most of the superintendents repeatedly explained the significance of protocol and accountability. Participant two stated, "We have district policies and a school board we need to report" (May 24, 2018).

## Implications of the Study's Results

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are offered to Massachusetts superintendents and other educational leaders.  Educational leaders should participate in professional 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 superintendents to participate in book studies such as Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich's (2016) text, *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas*.  Superintendents need time to discuss ethical dilemmas faced at work through roundtables and informal leadership gatherings.  Brown et al. (2005) pondered whether individuals were born as ethical leaders or were developed through training in the organization.  The vignettes used in this study or similar hypothetical ethical scenarios should be used as teaching tools in educational leadership preparation classes and in 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 educational licensure preparation programs.

One recommendation for colleges and universities with educational administration preparation programs would be to consider offering courses on decision-making and ethical dilemmas.  This study's results spoke to the lack of existing research suggesting more work needs to be done to understand the effects of the ethical decision-making fully and to prepare leaders for the challenges that it presents.

**Implications for Practice**

As the researcher coded the data collected during this study, a trend was discovered in the data that generated a recommendation for practice. Most of the superintendents in this study used multiple paradigms to frame difficult decisions. Although the data showed a tendency for the superintendents to use the ethic of justice or the ethic of the profession, examples were encountered that demonstrated the use of the care and critique paradigm as well. The data suggested decisions were multifaceted and sometimes required the use of several paradigms in determining an effective course of action. Some of the literature about the importance of the study of decision-making and ethics in educational leadership discussed the needs of students. In education, Shapiro and Stefkovich (as cited in Shapiro & Gross, 2013) believed, "it was a moral imperative for the profession to serve the best interest of students. They believed that this idea must lie at the heart of any professional paradigm for educational leaders" (p. 35).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings from this study suggest a need for additional research related to educational leadership and decision-making. More research needs to be conducted to explore the process used by educational leaders when making ethical decisions. It is critical that researchers seek to understand further the phenomenon of decision-making of superintendents.

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

1. Can assumptions one holds about core values, people, society, culture, drive one's choice of ethical decision making?

2.  Can exposing superintendents to various ethical decision-making models contribute to more informed decisions regarding ethical decision-making practice?

These questions could be answered through a survey of superintendents. The answers could also be found in an observational method of superintendents' daily work in the district in real-time. 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 multiple paradigm approach for ethical decision making, the emphasis is on the importance of ethics from a variety of theoretical approaches.

### Conclusions

This study focused specifically on the practice of ethical decision making by Massachusetts superintendents. The researcher sought to identify and describe the attitudes and processes that influenced the ethical decision making of superintendents. The research began with an overarching question: How do superintendents in Massachusetts make ethical decisions in their work? In addition, this study addressed the following questions:

1.  What ethical philosophies emerge when superintendents provide answers to real-life dilemmas in schools?

2.  Were decisions superintendents made regarding ethical dilemmas influenced by a commitment to any moral and ethical standard? If so, which standard?

3.  Which ethical frameworks (i.e., justice, care, critique, or the profession), if any, do superintendents use in making their decisions relative to the ethical dilemmas?

Several important conclusions were drawn from the findings obtained in this study. First, decision-making is a primary, educational leader's activity. Superintendents reported 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.  Second, it was evident that ethics was a necessary element when making decisions for leaders.  All of the decisions contained an ethical aspect so as superintendents they had to choose to either do right or wrong.  All of the superintendents were deeply concerned about ethics issues, and their concern influenced the ways they ran their districts.  In addition, the community values and core values were found to be an essential factor.

The profession of the school superintendency is more crucial than ever in a changing world of education.  Today's superintendent must be well-grounded, have a broad understanding of the challenges, issues, and dilemmas, as well as a sense of urgency for education.  The superintendent is held to very high standards in a very public arena.  They need to be sensitive to the diverse needs of all students, and their decisions should be based on well-grounded core values, care, professionalism, and policies.  According to Kidder (2003), "Standing up for values is the defining source of moral courage.  But *having* values is different from *living by* values—as the 21st century is rapidly learning" (p. 3).

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APPENDIX A: COVER LETTER FOR PARTICIPATION EMAIL

Cover Letter for Participation Email

Dear Fellow Superintendent,

My name is Maryann Perry. I am a doctoral candidate in the University of New England Program in Educational Leadership. I invite you to participate in my research, which will examine ethical responses to school situations by public school superintendents. The purpose of this study is to examine the basis of which superintendents make decisions to see if they are using the four ethical frameworks of the Multiple Ethical Paradigms to guide their decision-making. The primary purpose of the study is to understand as portrayed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) which moral framework(s) (justice, care, critique, the profession), assuming any, are actualized by Massachusetts administrators when decision-making.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to schedule a 30minute to one hour semi-structured interview either in person or through a secure web conference center. Your interview and responses will not be shared with anyone. Your responses to the four vignettes and questions will not be associated with your name or your school district. Please send me an email or call (781.589.1259) if you are interested in participating or want additional information.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to participate in this research. It is only with support from committed superintendents like you that this study can be successful and informative.

Sincerely,

Maryann Perry

Maryann Perry
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England
Mperry11@une.edu
781.589.1259

APPENDIX B: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL #2 AND #3

Dear Superintendent,

One week ago, you received an email inviting you to participate in a study designed to examine the decision-making process to school situations by public school superintendents in Massachusetts.

To participate, all you need to do is respond to this email or call me at 781.589.1259. The semi-structured interview will approximately 30 minutes to one hour in person or through a secure web conference center.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to participate in this research. Please contact me if you have any additional questions or to set up an interview time.


Sincerely,
Maryann Perry
Maryann Perry
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England
Mperry11@une.edu
781.589.1259

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Informed Consent Form**

University of New England

Consent for Participation in Research

Project Title: DECISION-MAKING AND ETHICS: A STUDY OF MASSACHUSETTS

SUPERINTENDENTS

**Principal Investigator:** Maryann Perry, Graduate Student, University of New England, mperry11@une.edu (email), and 781.589.1259 (cell phone)

**Faculty Advisor**: Dr. William Boozang, University of New England, wboozang@une.edu (email), and 508.446.7685 (phone)

**Introduction:**
- Please read this form, you may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this study being done?**
- The study is being conducted for research purposes only. The purpose of the study is to understand what ethical frameworks do Massachusetts superintendents use when making decisions: the ethic of justice, care, critique, or the profession.

**Who will be in this study?**
- The participants in the study are Massachusetts Public School Superintendents
- You must be at least 18 years of age to participate
- 6-10 superintendents will be interviewed for this study

**What will I be asked to do?**
- The researcher will solicit participation of superintendents through the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents' list serve. The superintendents' will be asked to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 30minutes to-45 to one hour. A piece of paper with four vignettes, one paragraph in length will be given to each superintendent a day before the scheduled interview. The superintendent will then read and answer verbally four questions at the end of each vignette. The researcher, will record your responses. The participant can ask to stop the recording at any time. The responses will be stored in a secure setting and

transcribed. The researcher will email the transcript to the superintendent to check if they would like to add any clarifying information or delete any portion of the recording.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**
- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**
- There are no direct benefits to you participating in this study. However, the data collected can add to the research in the field of leadership and ethical decision-making.

**What will it cost me?**
- Participants will not incur any costs by participating in this study.

**How will my privacy be protected**?
- Semi-structured interviews will be conducted in a private meeting space, phone call or through a secure web conference center. In order to protect the participant's privacy, every participant will be assigned a fictitious name.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**
- Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured on a home office computer that is password protected. Voice files developed during the interview process will be destroyed one the transcription is completed and verified. Data will be coded using the participant's pseudonym.
- Research findings will be available to participants upon request in writing or through email.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- Please note the Institutional Review Board may review the final report. The data in the report will only display the pseudonyms given to the participants.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

**What other options do I have?**
- You may choose not to participate

**Whom may I contact with questions?**
- The researcher conducting this study is Maryann Perry For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 781.589.1259 or Mperry11@une.edu
- You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, William Boozang, Ed.D at 508.446.7685 or wboozang@une.edu
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact William Boozang, Ed.D at 508.446.7685 or wboozang@une.edu
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**
- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

_____

**Participant's Statement**

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.


_____          _____
Participant's signature or                                           Date
Legally authorized representative


_____
Printed name

APPENDIX D: VIGNETTES AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**After School**

Debra, a principal of a small elementary school, K-3, had implemented several team-building exercises to increase collaboration within the school culture.  One Friday every month was a professional development day.  After school, staff met at a local establishment for a social gathering.  This has led to increased collaboration among staff and leadership.  Mrs. Thompson, the most active parent at the school, showed the superintendent a picture on Facebook of the principal, Debra, drinking a shot of tequila.  She was able to access Facebook because she was a "friend" of Mr. Raymond, who was at the restaurant.  Debra was in the background of a picture of Mr. Raymond and his wife.  Mrs. Thompson wanted her son out of the school and transferred to the other elementary school because she viewed this as irresponsible behavior showing a lack of self-control and an inability to manage a school

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the superintendent do?
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. 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.  Drew, 8 years old, is a Buddhist student.  His teacher introduced the curriculum in the beginning of the school year by showing the students live bugs they would have to feed the class lizard.  Each student was to have a week of feeding the lizard.  Drew was troubled and hurt by this and after three weeks of witnessing the students feed the live bugs to the lizard, he set the bugs and the lizard free at recess.  Drew 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.  The principal tried to manage the situation but now it has landed in the superintendent's office.

1. What issues are at stake here?
2. What should the superintendent do?
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or "downsides" are there to your action/decision?

**Deaf Education**

Mr. Mingle, 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 Mr. Mingle's class than in the other deaf education class.  Mr. Mingle was called to the superintendent's office where he

explained that he did sign "conceptually accurate" ASL instead of "verbatim" English word order because he stated that signing correct ASL gives  students a clearer picture of the questions and levels the playing field for deaf students . He 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 superintendent do?
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 district has a zero-tolerance policy on bringing weapons to school.  Anthony, a high school sophomore who volunteers at the central office after school, approached the superintendent in the hallway and said, "You have to suspend me from school."  Anthony 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 superintendent do?
3. What would you hope your action/decision would accomplish?
4. What possible risks or "downsides" are there to your action/decision?

(Adapted from Hozien, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016)